The Sorcerer King of Destruction and the GOLEM of the Barbarian Queen

NOVEL 02

WRITTEN BY
Northcarolina

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shiba

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"……"
"For the future!
Please, Nemaki, please!
Just this one!"
"A pleasure to meet you.
I've heard rumors that
you're quite the wielder."
SUSPICIOUS EYE-PATCHED MAN
JECT BARO
MANA TOOL MERCHANT
BESET BY TROUBLE
CHOTOS
INNOCENT FIVE-YEAR-OLD
TERU
BUSTY SPELLCASTER
ELEDU ZEU
STRONGEST GOLEM WIELDER
GINEM BARI

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Seven Seas Entertainment

HAMETSU NO MADOO TO GOLEM NO BANHI VOL. 2

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Illustrated by Shiba

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TRANSLATION: Kimberly Chan
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Dayna Abel, Rebecca Schneidereit
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: E.M. Candon
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
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Epilogue

Chapter 1:
Deer and the Town of Tibar

WAS IT MY IMAGINATION? The faint scent of an animal drifted in on the headwind. I had been walking with my eyes cast down, so I slowly closed them as I raised my face and tried to ascertain the unknown source of that momentary scent.

Rolling hills and open plains stretched before me, interrupted only by a long, straight road and the gentle beds of sparse flora I'd seen throughout my journey. At that moment, I noticed something moving around the hill up ahead. I turned toward it, and my eyes widened.

"That's…"

A deer. A giant deer was standing there. You know, one of those hoofed animals with the horns. The familiar herbivores you can meet in Nara Park. Yeah, those deer.

In Nara, deer will swarm humans carrying special rice crackers meant to feed them, but rather than chewing on the crackers, the deer prefer nomming on people's clothes. The victims of such deer swarms soon find themselves drenched in drool. You really can't let your guard down around those gentle beasts. Their sweet round eyes should be feared.

"Hey, it's a deer! There really is a deer over there!" I shouted excitedly and turned to my partner who, as ever, stood next to me. "Hey, Gol, look over there! I guess deer exist in this world, too."

When I called out to the white golem known as Gol, she quickly brought her face close to mine. With long ears on either side of her head, this golem resembled an elf. She tilted her lovely face, and her gentle crimson eyes gleamed faintly. This beautiful elf golem continued to look not at the deer, but at me, and she didn't show any sign of turning away.

"Um, Gol…not me, the deer…"

As I said that, Gol finally threw a glance at the deer, but she soon lost interest and turned back to me. It appeared Gol didn't care much about deer. She was far more interested in my smiling, excited face.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, my heart throbbed keenly. Several days had passed since I was summoned to this unfamiliar world as the Sorcerer King. However, throughout my journey, the only vertebrates I had encountered were monkeys; a dinosaur; and a wonderful, bespectacled man. And now, suddenly, this deer.

Compared to the aforementioned lineup, the deer was far and away the most soothing presence. This was a wonderful encounter. How very pleasant.

"Still, that's a pretty big species of deer…" I stopped on the road. Shading my eyes with my hand, I squinted to focus on this titan of an herbivore. "A deer, huh…? Is 'deer' the word I'm looking for?"

It was such a large animal that I was compelled to wonder aloud. Its physique was more akin to that of a reindeer or moose than a Japanese deer. Judging by the height of the shrub beside it, it was two meters tall at the shoulders. Not the size of a normal deer. In fact, including its massive horns, it was closer to four meters in total. Anyway, it was humongous.
On top of that, this otherworldly deer had this strange, intimidating aura. Its bright half-moon eyes seemed to be glaring at me. Its ominous, twisted, deep scarlet horns were like lethal weapons. Truthfully, some might consider its appearance to be both terrifying and eerie.
But I wasn't a man who judged animals by their appearance, not like those more superficial humans. After all, any animal's appearance was simply an artifact of nature. All shapes were the shape of life.
"How can I put it…? It's beautiful. I might even be falling in love," I murmured, spellbound by this gallant and elegant deer.
However, in the next moment, my eyes widened. Gol was suddenly standing in front of the deer. For some reason, a dangerous bloodlust emitted from her lovely elven back. She and the giant horned animal glared at one another from only a hair's breadth apart.
"H-hey, Gol…" I said. Gol, what are you doing? You're scaring the deer. Hurry up and come back.
But there was no time for me to voice such thoughts. Gol unleashed a lightning-speed high kick, an explosive flash from the white goddess of death. Her target was the giant deer's forehead.
One hit. That was all it took to smash the deer's head in, flinging bone shards and gray matter into the air.

***

"Listen, Gol. Listen real close now. It's not normal to act with such indiscriminate violence toward animals." As I walked along the road, I explained how the world worked.
Gol's long ears twitched slightly. This was how she indicated happiness, and she often did so whenever I talked to her.
"Look here… Are you actually reflecting on your actions?"
Although I sighed deeply at my troublesome partner, I couldn't be too stern with her. I understood why Gol was nervous around wild animals. Since her creation, she had only encountered hostile wildlife. Those awful monkeys and that giant earthen dinosaur had attacked us as soon as we encountered them.
Those creatures were known as mana beasts, so they were probably outside the norm, animal-wise. However, I admittedly had zero applicable knowledge about this world's basic ecology. It was entirely possible Gol's decision to exterminate the deer had been the wisest option. I couldn't scold her irresponsibly.

“In any case, we’ve finally started seeing wild animals other than monkeys…” I mused and returned my gaze forward.
The wide, straight road stretching beneath my feet continued from east to west, just as its name on our map—“East-West Highway”—implied.
Today was the third day since our lucky victory over the ancient Earth Dragon/dinosaur/whatever-it-was and we parted ways with our traveling companion, Master Speria. He had gone north, while Gol and I headed westward on this road.
We appeared to be clear of the miasma-infested region. The scenery could no longer be called a barren wasteland. Grass, short trees, shrubs, and all sorts of greenery grew on the sides of the road and on the slopes of hills. It had also been a while since I’d seen a monkey.
Just as the features of the landscape were changing, so too was the wildlife. The deer was surely another one of those signs we had entered new territory. I expected that soon, we might even see other humans on the road to the next settlement.
I rummaged through my black shoulder bag and pulled out our map, which I unfolded to study. “Um, the next settlement is…Tibar, right? Ah, I think it’s this relatively big one.”
We’d passed numerous abandoned and uninhabited settlements along the way. The further west we went, the shorter the distance between the ruins. Given this trend in settlement distribution, I assumed the center of civilization lay to the west. That meant the east was considered relatively remote. In fact, Master Speria had said the center of this nation, the imperial capital, was further west on this very road.
The past few days of our journey had been fairly comfortable. I hadn’t needed to worry about camping out at night because between the frequency of empty settlements and our ability to pace ourselves with the map, we had been able to time it so we could borrow uninhabited houses to sleep in. Still, in the end, I wanted to reach a human settlement soon. I missed soft beds, and while the preserved food in my possession didn’t taste bad, I wanted to try a proper meal in this world. If the map was correct, it wouldn’t be long until we reached the town of Tibar.
I might even be able to see something once we’re over that hill. With this modest hope, I stepped onto the green grass and climbed up the slope. At the top of the hill, I looked down in anticipation and gasped. “Oh! Are there people here?!”
Up ahead was a cluster of buildings packed into dense rows of houses and other structures. Had I finally reached my destination? Could I dare hope that Tibar still had people living in it?
As I strained my eyes, I saw something that looked like chimney smoke rising above the rooftops. Furthermore, there were tons of buildings. The town was much larger than any of the other settlements I had passed thus far. In fact, its true size exceeded its scale on the map—it didn’t feel like a mere farming village so much as an actual town.

Hooray! Civilization! My heart was filled with unutterable relief. At the very least, I would no longer need to worry about running out of food or water in no-man's-land and ending up a skeleton.

At that moment, I had a uniquely physical epiphany brought on by the unusual conditions of my situation: No longer having to fear starvation leads to *profound* peace of mind and significant psychological improvement. In any case, if possible, I hoped that in this town I could exchange a few items for money and acquire the basic means of truly surviving in this world. Only after that could I decide on my next course of action.

We soon arrived at the town's eastern gate, which was large, wooden, and tightly closed. Also, there was no one around. While it was a fairly fine gate, it didn't appear to have been used in a long time.

But…Tibar wasn't a ghost town. After seeing smoke from that nearby hill, I was convinced there were people inside. I folded my arms and racked my brain in front of the unmanned, locked gate.

"Ah, right. Come to think of it, it's probably because only monkeys come from this direction… If this town has another entrance, there wouldn't be any need to open this gate. Let's look for another way in."

Gol and I headed south to circle clockwise around the town. As we circled the perimeter, I took the chance to study Tibar. All the settlements I had encountered before had rotten wooden fences—they were practically defenseless farming villages. However, this town was surrounded by an earthen wall, though it was a bit simple. There also appeared to be some kind of tall structure inside the walls that I assumed was a watchtower. But there didn't seem to be anyone stationed in it. I didn't think a single person in Tibar was aware of our approach.

What a carefree and idyllic town. Perhaps these simple walls staved off all local threats. Although, well, I couldn't imagine them holding against an assault by one of this world's deadliest animals: the monkey. One hit from one of those wretched creature's killer rugby balls would no doubt pierce several of these earthen walls.

I took note of some relatively new roofs while we walked, but from what I had seen earlier, most of the local buildings were quite aged. I wondered if some people had moved to Tibar to escape the Earth miasma to the east. If that were the case, it might explain why the town was bigger than its depiction on the map.

I arrived at the southern side of the city, but there was no entrance there, either. However, I wasn't about to stress out over such a small setback. Gol and I continued walking toward the western side. However, at this rate I was beginning to feel like we were going to walk nearly the entire circumference of the town before we got inside.

As we went, I saw a vast field to my left. I wondered what kind of field it was. Maybe wheat? From this distance, the vegetation seemed too short for that, so perhaps it was some kind of grass. As we got closer, I confirmed

that it was a proper and well-constructed agricultural field. Several shadows moved on the far side of it. People. Farming.
“Oh, *people*…”
They weren’t monkeys. There were people—*real* people here.
Ah, there’s also a girl! I wonder if she’s helping her parents.
She was an ordinary, dime-a-dozen country girl, but that didn’t mean she was particularly plain or anything. Actually, she was too far away for me to really see her face. In fact, she might have been a short old lady.
Nevertheless, I was trembling with emotion. In my life of skeletons, old men, and awful monkeys, a woman had finally appeared. It was like…how can I put it? Like the gods had bestowed something precious and charming upon me.
As I offered a prayer to these great gods, I increased my pace along the wheat field. Then I stopped. Something had caught my eye.
“Oh, it’s a gate.” It looked just like the one on the other side of the walls. This was probably the town’s entrance. I had already circled to the opposite side of Tibar. In other words, this was Tibar’s western gate, and it was wide open.
A road from inside the town flowed out of the open gate and led straight westward. I suspected the road that ran from east to west cut through the center of this circular town. However, due to the threat of the Earth miasma, no one could travel eastward at present. As such, the eastern gate was closed and this town was something of a dead end.
As I gazed at the gate, I became distracted by the shapes of people going in and out of the town.
“People. More people!” I was perhaps getting too excited at the mere sight of other people. I couldn’t help it. I mean, all the primates I had met thus far —aside from Master Speria—had been either monkeys or bones.
Even though I was trembling with emotion, I slid over to hide in the nearby shadows to observe the situation around the gate. Upon closer inspection, there were quite a lot of people. This town seemed to have a more than decent amount of traffic. People in traveling clothes and packed wagons lined the road.
Wagons, huh? So this world had horses, too. Well, of course it did—after all, monkeys and deer existed, too. As for the people, their clothes were somewhat unique, and they looked to be of all sorts of unfamiliar ethnicities.
“Wait… I thought there would only be Western-looking people, but…doesn’t that person look slightly Japanese?”
A woman in her fifties was carrying a large basket on her back as she entered the town, and she had an East Asian-looking face.
Ah, right. Master Speria hadn’t been particularly surprised to see someone like me. In fact, he had mistaken me for someone who’d drifted in this direction from the strife-ridden east.

“That means it’s highly possible other East Asian-looking people are already mixed in with the general population…”
That would be helpful. It lessened the possibility that I would be immediately flagged as suspicious based on my appearance. As a person from another world of unidentifiable origin, I could only be grateful for that.
“If that’s the case, I don’t have to awkwardly sneak around. In fact, it seems like a better plan to act casual. Hey, Gol, what do you think?” I thought I should ask for my partner’s opinion, so I turned to look behind me.
Whoa! As usual, Gol’s face was super close to mine. She peered at me with bright eyes. It didn’t seem like she was arguing against my proposed strategy. However, the tips of her fingers gripped the hem of my robe.
“Oh…? How long have you been doing that? You don’t have to. I’m not gonna run away or anything.”
I realized then that ever since I had noticed that girl in the fields, Gol had been close behind me, clutching my robe. Also, when I studied the East Asian-looking middle-aged woman, Gol had upped her clinginess to a two-handed robe-clutch. To be fair, her grip was gentle and calm, so I couldn’t complain.
Still, having a golem holding my robe seemed a bit shameful. I had to put a stop to this as her responsible owner. I lightly touched Gol’s hand. “Huh? Y-your hand…”
It was faintly trembling.
“What? Eh? Are you okay?” As I inspected Gol more thoroughly, I found her pupils were slightly cloudy. What was up with her? I stroked Gol’s quivering knuckles. “Gol, are you feeling unwell?”
And thus did a man continue to stroke a golem’s hand in the shadow of a town’s entrance while the golem leaned against him, weakly shivering.
What a surreal scene.
“Relax. Everything’s all right. I’m here for you.” As I desperately reassured and pet Gol, her trembling gradually decreased. Before long, she began to rub her face against mine like a pampered child. “Th-thank goodness. She’s better…”
What exactly was all that shaking about? Was this possibly some kind of golem malfunction? I certainly hoped not.
As I wiped the sheen of sweat off my brow, I turned my attention back to the entrance of Tibar. Fortunately, the people at the gate hadn’t noticed our presence.
This western gate was just like the eastern one: old and wooden, but fairly elegant. A man standing nearby carried a long spear, so there at least appeared to be some kind of gatekeeper. But to tell you the truth, he didn’t appear to be particularly strong. He wore cheap-looking brown armor and seemed like an ordinary, unmotivated old man.
I observed him for some time, but the gatekeeper was just standing around. The travelers and their vehicles passed through the gate unchallenged.
“Doesn’t look like they’re going to ask for my papers or anything.”

All right, I guess even a homeless rando unwillingly employed as the Sorcerer King can enter. In that case, time to go.

I summoned my resolve and walked forward with Gol. In order to not raise suspicion, I strode with confidence and grace.

I did feel a bit nervous when we passed the gatekeeper, but he paid much more attention to Gol than me. It reminded me of how, whenever a person takes their beautiful dog on a walk, people notice the dog more than the person with them. Thanks to that, I managed to avoid drawing attention and sashayed past without being called out.

You're a big help, partner. Your very existence is a boon.

Inside the walls, the town of Tibar was lively. There were rows and rows of houses and all manner of people walking through the streets as children ran about. Some folks looked like herders with livestock. Were those sheep accompanying them? I also saw what looked like a gray mannequin unloading something from a wagon on the other side of the road. Could that be a golem?

As I walked, I found many of the buildings on the main road that cut through the center of Tibar were shops of one kind or another. I slowed in front of what seemed like a grocery store, which had unfamiliar vegetables and fruits on display in front. A purple lotus root-looking thing was hung above the rest, and I wondered what it was. Was it edible? There was some more familiar produce like pumpkins and carrots, too, though honestly, I suspected they were still a different variety than the ones on Earth.

The surrounding skyline was quite tidy. However, there weren't many large structures. The only thing that stuck out in terms of height was that watchtower I had spotted back on the eastern side of the town. The rest of the buildings were largely one-story tall and made of wood.

Between the summoner Luvel Zairein's hideout and the empty houses in the abandoned villages I had passed on my journey, it seemed to me that this world's civilization was a bit old-fashioned compared to the modernity I was used to.

Then again, this world had spells. Given how inexperienced I was with spells and their impact, I couldn't make many—if any—assumptions about how different this world was from my home.

In any case, I was aware that on top of being a tragic dud, my beloved Earth attribute hadn't been able to contribute anything to the development of civil engineering. *Now I'm getting sad, so let's stop thinking about it.*

Another thing that interested me about this town was, hmm…right. I'd seen them at the gate as well. People who looked like travelers littered the streets. Their luggage and equipment was uniformly more appropriate and substantial than my single shoulder bag. However, because of the adverse effects of the Earth miasma, no one in Tibar could possibly be heading further east. Did that make this town the end of the road? Now that I thought about it, Gol and I hadn't encountered anyone on our way in from the east. Also, the city's eastern gate was closed.

So where were these travelers heading?
The flood of questions and my insatiable curiosity surely made me look like a country bumpkin as I gawked at everything in sight. However, some instinct made me suddenly worried about Gol, and I turned toward her. She was standing quietly just behind me. That strange shivering that had overtaken her outside the town had vanished, and she no longer gripped my robe. Gol was back to normal.
Wait, was it right to call her present attitude “normal”? Even though we’d finally arrived in a town, Gol didn’t look the least bit happy. Actually, her attitude toward the town and its people was strangely cold.
Although her bearing now was calm, I kind of preferred how she’d been when she first encountered those monkeys or that deer. At least in those moments, she’d felt like she was *with* me as I got excited over the animals, even if she didn’t agree about how lovely they were. But now, Gol didn’t show the least interest in the people walking the streets in their vibrant clothes, or the strange townscape that oozed the feeling of another world.
I think this is a little different from just being bad with crowds. How can I put it…? It’s like she doesn’t have any interest in human civilization whatsoever.
For a while now, Gol’s crimson eyes had been staring at me, though I wasn’t sure if she was aware of my unease. As usual, the look on her face was very kind. However, I couldn’t shrug this odd anxiety.
Let’s just check in with Gol one more time. After all, confirmation is important.
“Listen, Gol… You can’t attack the people or golems in this town. You can only attack someone if I give you permission or if they make a move on us first. Can you be a good girl and promise me this?” I reiterated the bare minimum rule for living and functioning in society.
In the past, when we’d visited the shrine on the way to Tibar, I’d given Gol insufficient instruction along the lines of “Don’t punch anyone.” This had resulted in a tragedy wherein Gol simply *kicked* her opponents to smithereens.
The blame for this incident fell on me, her incompetent owner. My innocent Gol was not at fault. Nevertheless, we could not repeat the same mistake.
Gol leaned in as I addressed her in my most serious tone, her crimson eyes sparkling. With each word I spoke at this close distance, her lovely long ears moved faintly, tickling me. Hmm, was she actually listening?
I gradually grew more nervous. In my mind, I once more saw the sight of the busty shrine golems being violently trampled, one after another, by Gol’s overwhelming brute strength and destructive power.
No. If I don’t believe in Gol, what am I going to do? I’m sure she’s fine. I mean, Gol was just having a bit of a panic attack at the time.
That tragedy lay squarely on me. Gol had misread my interest in the one golem’s remains as perverted, and this had wounded her pure and innocent

heart. It was my obligation to take responsibility for this incident; no one else should cut open their stomach over it.
My beloved partner Gol was the picture of consideration, always sincere and unceasingly gentle. She understood other people's pain, though I feared she was forever too hesitant to assert her own needs. There was no way I could or would ever do anything to hurt her. In any case, Gol would never do anything bad to people who stood by my side.
So, why? Why was I feeling such anxiety?
In order to dispel the doubt in my heart, I offered my pinky finger to Gol.
"Gol, stick your pinky out like this."
Gol obeyed and mimicked my action by slowly sticking out her pinky, though she did so a bit hesitantly. I entwined my finger around hers and performed a pinky promise.
"All right. This is a promise, partner," I said, smiling.
Maybe pinky promises were rare; Gol kept her pinky entwined with mine. Although she usually showed no resistance to my actions, this was a bit of a concern.
It just felt…weird.

Chapter 2:
Mana Tool Shop and Restaurant

"HMPH, THESE SORCERY CORES are quite crude. I don't think I can sell them," said the short merchant in an apologetic voice. His thinning hair was brushed over his bald pate, and he was the proprietor of the mana tool shop in Tibar.

Even if I just wanted to walk around town, I needed money to do anything. I'd come to his shop to exchange the sorcery cores I'd harvested from the large monkeys' skeletons for just such currency.

A grandma on the street who seemed to have some spare time had directed me here. She had informed me that if I needed to exchange the raw materials of mana beasts, I wanted a mana tool shop. Then she gave me a piece of candy. Although it feels a little presumptuous to say this, the elderly have always been pretty friendly with me.

The candy she gave me had an unfamiliar nostalgic flavor, like that of a mellow fruit.

No, wait, now wasn't the time for such tangents. The monkeys' sorcery cores were subpar goods? How could this be?! Those damn monkeys! Even in death, they were useless. Hmph, hadn't I doubted from the very beginning that I could sell some dirty rock that came out of one of those inept monkeys?

Well…I'd thought I would be able to exchange them for *some* money.

"I-Is that so? I apologize for taking up your time," I said. I dropped my shoulders and turned on my heel, ready to leave the shop.

As I did, the merchant called out from behind me. "Please, wait a moment, young noble sir."

"Noble sir…?" I turned, only to find the merchant staring at me.

"Don't play dumb. The tailoring of your robe and shoes, and that elegant shrine golem accompanying you… Even if I weren't a merchant, I would be able to tell straight away that you're not some commoner, right?"

Ah, right. I looked down at my robe and shoes. I wore an olive-brown spellcaster robe and this world's version of leather boots. Both items had come from Imperial Master Spellcaster Luvel Zairein's hideout. That was probably why they signaled status to this man. The next item on his list was my partner, Gol, standing silently behind me. Her lovely form was the Platonic ideal of beauty. The transcendent elegance of this white elf golem's limbs completely overshadowed the high-class impression of my robe and shoes.

My silence was taken as a lack of argument.

The merchant scratched his short mustache as he probed further, "Seeing as you're trying to exchange a large number of sorcery cores, you must be

in great need of money. You don't seem to be from around here, so may I ask where exactly you *did* come from?"
"Um…that's…"
Now, for that, I was truly at a loss. I highly doubted I could be truthful and simply say I'd come from another world. Also, I feared that if my true identity as "the Sorcerer King destined to destroy this world etc., etc." were revealed, I would be mistakenly arrested as the worst kind of criminal. I had to think of some kind of explanation.
Um, if I recall correctly, Master Speria mistook my birthplace for somewhere in this world, right? Ah, right, right. I believe he said I was from a spellcaster family and had wandered here from the east due to political circumstances—
"I came from the east. My name is Nemaki Dasai. I've come here because of, well, a complicated situation," I said, certainly not lying.
It was true that direction-wise, I had come from the east. Moreover, being summoned to another world by an evil summoner as the Sorcerer King was absolutely what I would consider a "complicated situation."
"I see. Just as I thought…" As if convinced by my answer, the merchant nodded deeply. "If you're from the war-torn east, I assume you've dealt with quite a bit. I understand."
"Th-thank you for your consideration," I replied.
Wonderful! He'd made sense of my cop-out. It appeared this introduction had juice.
Master Speria, I am truly thankful for this convenient information. From now on, I shall draw on my teacher's advice for my introductions. I silently expressed my profound gratitude to my wonderful teacher.
The merchant studied my face and muttered, "Is that so… You really must've been through quite a lot." Wrinkles formed between the middle-aged man's brows. For just a moment, a hint of hesitation appeared on his face.
"Um, is there something wrong…?" I asked.
"Ah, no, sorry. It's nothing," he said. The merchant quickly shook his head. Since his movements were quick, the hair covering his wide forehead fell into disarray. "In that case, Mr. Nemaki, you have my condolences for your circumstances. How about I lend you a helping hand?"
"Hm? What do you mean?"
"Actually, even crude sorcery cores have some minimal use. Being in the business, I believe I can help you a bit. I guess I'm saying I can buy them off you."
"Eh? Really?"
"Indeed. However, the buying price will be drastically lowered. Despite that, do you still want to…?" the man asked.
His forehead shone and his mustache was sparse, and although such a face couldn't be considered charming in any sense of the word, at that moment, to me, he looked like a noble Buddha with a halo.

***

I left the mana tool shop and strolled through the streets before entering a restaurant with Gol. It was made of wood and stone and looked like a pub with a terrace that faced the street, so the interior was quite open and bright. Timewise, it was still too early for lunch, but the restaurant had several customers and felt relatively lively. The friendly atmosphere attracted me right away. From a personal standpoint, it felt like entering a family-owned, hole-in-the-wall joint.

I worked through the soothing hustle and bustle of the restaurant's interior as I made my way to an empty seat by the counter. Gol obediently sat to the seat on my left. From this position, I surveyed the interior with open curiosity.

Several of the male customers ogled Gol. Fortunately, it didn't feel like I was being treated as suspicious. I hoped I would be able to blend right in with the local scene. I believed this was possible because of Zairein's robe and boots. Just as the mana tool merchant pointed out, it was clear my outfit was several times more stately than those of the other patrons. One glance at my fine outfit and no one would assume I was a dine-and-dash risk. Furthermore, even though everyone's eyes were on my golem companion, we didn't get any particularly strange looks. I was really grateful for the apparent lack of an anti-pet policy—the staff didn't even ask me to leave Gol outside like a parked car.

In fact, as I scanned the crowd, I spied a traveler among the customers by the wall who was accompanied by a large, red lizard. It seemed like the pet policy was actually pretty lax. The red lizard lay on the ground, as obedient as Gol. On more thorough inspection, an unfastened saddle lay beside it. Could the creature be mounted?

"In any case, I can finally take a breather." I sank deeper into my counter seat and finally relaxed my shoulders, which had been tense since our arrival in town. Then I took out several types of coins from my bag of money. The clinking of the metal coins hitting each other made a satisfying sound.

Somehow, I had managed to successfully sell the monkeys' sorcery cores, which was why I could afford to enter such a restaurant.

I had learned the rough value of these coins from the mana tool merchant. Although he made a dubious face when I asked, I'd had no other choice. After all, my knowledge of this world was lower than that of an elementary school student. Although now that I thought about it, he'd known I was a foreigner, so perhaps he hadn't been that suspicious.

"Well, let's do a light review," I said as I lined up the four different types of coins on the counter.

The metal coins reflected the sunlight shining through from the open terrace, and each kind glittered in a different way. Iron, copper, silver, and

gold. Roughly ten copper coins would be enough for one meal at this establishment. Meanwhile, for one of these silver coins, I could book a stay at a decent inn in Tibar. The highest value belonged to the gold coins. One of these was worth fifty silver. Also, it was a coin made of *gold*. Amazing! Real gold!

Meanwhile, the iron coins had a hole in their center and were worth less than a copper. I believed their exact value was…ah, I'd forgotten.

However, on closer examination, I noticed some of the copper coins were larger. Huh? Why was that again? Now I was just confused.

So, you see, I was a man who was bad at accurately calculating his gains and losses. For the number of sorcery cores I sold, I'd earned twenty-five silver coins, thirty-eight copper coins, and seven iron coins.

However, I'd actually lumped those larger copper coins in with the smaller ones. I learned this later on, but these larger coins were made with the convenience of daily life in mind. Their worth was equivalent to that of several copper coins. In other words, it was like a five-hundred-yen coin in my original world. At the time, however, the large copper coin left me completely befuddled.

In any case, for one bag of sorcery cores from the monkeys, I could secure a stay at a decent inn for a whole month. It was quite the steal! I had received far more than I initially thought possible. And all this for sorcery cores that shouldn't have been sellable. The divine master of the mana tool shop was so very honorable.

Also, the consolation money I'd swiped from the drawer in Luvel Zairein's library, or in short, the initial amount of money I had, was five gold and ten silver. Therefore, if I combined the money in my possession with the money I'd made from the sorcery cores, I had five gold coins, thirty-five silver coins, and…how many copper coins again? Um…well, the point is that there was a bunch jingling.

Although I was ignorant to the price of commodities in this world, if I assumed one silver coin was roughly equivalent to the worth of a ten-thousand-yen coin in modern-day Japan, then I could probably consider the current amount of money in my possession to be around three million yen. I wasn't really sure about the finer details of the arithmetic, but…

With this amount, I don't think I'll need to worry about money for the time being. I might even be able to enjoy shopping in another world!

However, the coins I'd found in Zairein's library would be considered a bit measly for an inheritance. As someone with the grandiose title of Imperial Master Spellcaster, I would have thought he'd have more money for his heir. At least several million yen, maybe? No, more like several *hundred* million. Was my actual inheritance locked away somewhere else?

Then again, hadn't Zairein known he was going to die for his plan to destroy the world? In that context, why would he have left any money behind at all? Ah, then my lack of inheritance *did* make sense.

The money I'd found in his study might have been the remains of the funds he'd used to build the grand stage of the summoning ritual. Or…maybe the bundle of bills I'd found with the coins was the real meat of the inheritance. Yes, those suspicious bills with the words "Selvei Scrip" written on them. I'd forgotten to ask the mana tool merchant about them. I had been watching the customers in this restaurant, too, but everyone used coins to pay. Not a single person used paper money.

I think it would best not to use any Selvei scrips to pay my bill at this place. I should probably find somewhere I can exchange them for coins.

Maybe at a bank? Did banks even exist in this world? From what I'd seen of humble Tibar, I didn't expect to find such a fancy establishment.

"Well, I probably don't need to think this seriously about money," I muttered as I swept the coins back into my bag.

In fact, I was being a bit nonchalant about my financial situation. Hadn't I already survived no-man's-land before I came to this area with *people* and their tawdry *currency*?

Even if I ran out of money in the future, I highly doubted I would die of starvation. After all, I had the peerless Gol with me. As long as I knew what types of wild animals were edible, I would only ever need to ask my partner to hunt them. Her astonishing offensive ability and agility had let her single-handedly annihilate whole troops of monkeys hurling stone bullets. She'd have no trouble catching a rabbit or any other small animal. Come to think of it, Gol had instantly killed a deer only this morning. Maybe that was also edible!

No, wait a sec. I shook my head. Gol already pampers me too much. It'll look bad if I let myself take this moocher lifestyle any further. No good! No good at all.

Ah, there we go—I could try using *Earth Spear* where other humans couldn't see me and control it like a surface-to-air missile. I could probably even hit a flying bird. Though if I couldn't control it well enough, I ran the risk of turning my prey into so much splatter…

All right, if worse came to worst, Gol and I could become hunters.

Just as I began to entertain the thought of changing my job from Sorcerer King to an honorable Tohoku-style Matagi hunter, I realized I should set this aside for the time being. I was sitting at the counter of a restaurant. The reason I'd come here was to have a meal, not contemplate a career change.

So let's order some food already. I scanned the menu written on the wooden board. "Which one…?"

Leam-style lamb. Root-steamed stone barnacles and spring vegetables. Zernus brothers' honeycomb tart… Line upon line of unfamiliar dishes. While I recognized some ingredients, it was difficult to pin down what any one dish would taste like without understanding the whole name. "Just who are these Zernus brothers…?"

Anyway, I suspected the dish labeled "whole roasted red quail" was *probably* a roasted quail. The price was listed as nine copper coins,

moderate for a meat dish. The other meat dishes were, on average, over ten coppers.
“It can’t be helped. Guess I’ll just order a whole roast.”
Just when I was about to avoid a dubious culinary adventure and opt for the safe bet, I noticed the man sitting to my right.
He was round and plump—in other words, a fat man. Age-wise, he was still young. Was he around my age? Regardless, unconcerned by any onlookers, he immersed himself in his meal, entirely focused on stuffing his face full of the food on the large dish in front of him. As I gazed upon him, I felt some kind of inexplicable camaraderie.
Ah. I figured it out. He was wearing a robe similar to mine, one with a kind of capelet in the style of an Inverness coat. Was he also a spellcaster? Well, then. It seemed the average spellcaster dressed in this kind of clothing. I recalled Master Speria’s outfit had also resembled this spellcaster uniform, though since his clothes had been torn when we met, I couldn’t be too sure of the details. There had been quite a large hole around his stomach area.
But could I really use my and Master Speria’s outfits as points of reference for spellcasters at large? After all, my teacher was twice as old as me. Not to mention, if an unamicable-looking youth like myself were to imitate the style of such a gentle older fellow—one whose smile could knock any lady off her feet—I would only insult him.
In any case, there wasn’t much difference between my clothes and those worn by the man sitting next to me. Based on this, I was likely easily recognized as a spellcaster. More importantly, the dish in front of my neighbor appeared to be some kind of pizza.
It must be really delicious, huh?
My fellow spellcaster wasn’t the least bit aware of my open stare as he continued to stuff his cheeks with this world’s version of a pizza.
Well, my unnamed neighbor… Ah, right, I’ll just call you Pizzaman in the meantime. Looks like you’re truly enjoying your meal, Pizzaman.
For some reason, watching him made my stomach grumble. And heck, I was finally inside a restaurant in another world. I might as well be a little adventurous.
“Um, I’ll have whatever the man next to me is having,” I said to the proprietor behind the counter.
“Got it! One baked sempiol, comin’ up.”
Oh? A baked sempiol, was it?
After giving my order, I waited a while before a hot dish was brought to me. Since it was freshly baked in a stone oven, puffs of steam wafted from it.
“All right, your baked sempiol,” said the man behind the counter.
This was the first time I had seen a freshly baked product since coming to this world. I was actually a bit moved. A luxurious slathering of cheese, mushrooms, thick slices of meat, and brightly colored vegetables were strewn over a flat, fluffy base. It looked delectably hearty. An egg had been cracked on top of all these ingredients. The flames from the oven hadn’t

fully cooked the egg, which left it in a perfectly runny state, and it appeared I was supposed to dip the rest of the baked sempiol in it.
When I took a bite, I couldn't get enough of the rich, aromatic flavor. Plus, the way the melted cheese and dripping egg mixed together was sublime.
"Oh, damn. This is reeeally good. Are you kidding me…?" Just like Pizzaman, I was in a trance as I chewed through the baked sempiol. He, incidentally, had by then moved on to his second.
Thanks, Pizzaman. You have really good taste.

"Hah, I'm stuffed. I'm in paradise." I rubbed my belly, satisfied with my meal at this restaurant in another world. Once I finished my baked sempiol, I was on a high and ordered a "Zernus brothers' honeycomb tart" for dessert. How can I put it? Since the baked sempiol was so much more delicious than I could have imagined, I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to try out another suspicious-sounding dish… Ah, that's it. I ordered in the spirit of adventure.
This dessert from some questionable brothers was a honeycomb-shaped pastry baked to a light golden-brown that resembled a berry tart with honey and strawberry-looking fruits. Its sweetness melted my cheeks. Yup, that tart was just delicious.
I'm truly sorry, Zernus brothers. Please forgive Past Me for doubting you.
I didn't need to know the ingredients to be satisfied with my meal. I opened my black leather shoulder bag and rummaged through it to pay the bill. This bag, which I'd received as a graduation present from Master Speria, was stuffed with random things despite its unusual weightlessness. Well, there currently wasn't much inside, so that lightness probably didn't mean much.
As I was thinking absentmindedly about the abnormality of the bag, I noticed something shining at the bottom. "Huh? What's this…?"
I picked up a crystal the size of a dry-cell battery that glistened blackly. It was a monkey's sorcery core. It must have spilled out of the bag I kept the rest of the cores in and fallen to the bottom sometime during my journey. As such, I hadn't sold it to the mana tool merchant.
Although it looked like a first-class gem, I could only let out a sigh as I held it in my hand. "If only this weren't a low-grade piece of junk…"
In fact, if it weren't for the fact that these cores were crude, I could have gotten a pretty penny for them. Apparently, sorcery cores of good quality could be sold at a much better price. By my estimation, a bag of quality cores might even ring up several gold coins. If that was true, my financial concerns could have been completely blown away.
That being the case, I should have properly searched around for better sorcery cores each time Gol mercilessly mowed down a big monkey.
I shook my head a little at the thought. That wouldn't have been a realistic approach. To retrieve sorcery cores from sources other than skeletons, I would have needed to dissect the fresh corpses of those awful monkeys. I

certainly hadn't had the time *or* the mentality to do so on my possibly endless journey filled with random bursts of violence.
Most importantly, when I had been traveling with Master Speria, he hadn't shown any inclination to gather these sorcery cores, so of course I'd thought they were worthless.
Seriously, that man has so few worldly desires… As I reminisced about that scholarly, bespectacled man, I finished my cup of cold water and continued turning the black crystal in my other hand.
At that moment, a voice suddenly called to me from the side. "Whoa. That's an Earth Ogre's sorcery core, right? Amazing!"
The owner of this voice was Pizzaman, who was now on his third baked sempiol.
Earth Ogre? What's that? Oh, was he referring to the monkeys? According to Master Speria, the monkeys were known as Earth Goblins, if I recalled correctly. I supposed that made the large monkeys the Earth Ogres. I had to be careful. Because I'd been constantly calling them monkeys, I'd completely forgotten their official name.
"You know, like, how Earth Ogres create an outer stone shell with mana circulation?" Pizzaman continued. "Well, they're practically like golems, am I right? Defeating them must've been, like, super hard. I mean, spells don't work on them, right? They also fire off their instant-death spell *Stone Bullet*. They're fast, intelligent, and come in swarms. Honestly, I can't even imagine how you could defeat one. Y-you're amazing…!" Pizzaman said. His eyes twinkled as he rapidly fired off this one-sided conversation. Those eyes were so lovely in their excitement that I felt I would be sucked right in.
Still, I didn't mind being complimented. More importantly, I didn't sense any sarcasm or flattery in his beaming expression. His face simply looked like that of a student sincerely praising a classmate who was good at something.
It looks like spellcasters are surprisingly pleasant people. Well, that might just be his personality.
Although Pizzaman was gushing with compliments, I had really only picked this sorcery core out of a skeleton.
Let's be honest and tell him the truth.
"There were corpses on the road. I only picked this up from one."
"Oh? Still, how lucky. But, you know, finding a skeleton of an Earth Ogre meant you ventured into the miasma, right? That alone is, like, not something just anyone could do."
Pizzaman admired me for some time before noticing Gol sitting next to me. I followed his line of sight and casually glanced over at Gol. She was delicately wiping the remainder of the tart from my left cheek.
Gol, thanks for always being so kind. But, please, I beg of you… Just this once, please don't treat me like an infant. My pride and dignity were being shredded as she continued babying me in front of my classmate.
Gol wiped my cheek, uncaring about the tears in my eyes.

Pizzaman said to me, “I see. So that outrageous beauty of a shrine golem that’s been sitting beside you this whole time… At first, I thought it was because of your preference, but that’s not it, right? You’re actually, like, not a simple aristocrat but, like, a pretty good golem wielder, right?”
“No… Um, what do you mean by ‘preference’…?”
Pizzaman, do you think I’m some bishoujo figurine fanatic? Well, huh? I swallowed back my tears at my classmate’s doubtlessly declining image of me.
Pizzaman remained unaware of his unintentional insult as he ate the rest of his baked sempiol, and he rubbed his stuffed belly. “Still, I’m envious of you. On top of having, like, a beautiful golem accompanying you, you also have a high-quality sorcery core. If you sold that for a decent price, you could, like, live the rest of your life free of worry. As for me, I’m gonna run out of money soon. Maybe the Association—”
My shoulders twitched at Pizzaman’s statement. “Sorry, but could you say that again?”
“Eh? What? That I’m, like, gonna run out of money soon, so I might need to ask the Spellcaster’s Association for help? I’m, like, bummed out.”
“No, not that. Before. About the sorcery core.”
Pizzaman looked at me with his wide, pure eyes and responded with a puzzled frown. “Eh? Oh, that your Earth Ogre sorcery core was, like, huge. I could tell from just one look that, like, it’s good-quality product, and if you sell it, you’ll definitely get, like, a ton of money.”
“Wha…?”
Wh-what did he just say?

Chapter 3:
Stupid Boss and Knight

LIKE A LIVING CORPSE, I staggered down the street with shaking steps. An unbelievable fact had been revealed to me. I had sold my sorcery cores at a fiendishly low price to the mana tool shop, fooled into thinking they were worthless trash.

How dare that man! Deceive me?! U-unforgivable! Damn barcode-hair from another world!

Pizzaman had explained that the crystallization of a sorcery core inside a mana beast was itself a rare phenomenon, and as such, sorcery core supply couldn't match the demand. Every core was a valuable treasure readily traded for an exorbitant amount.

According to the esteemed Sir Pizzaman, as I was a naïve aristocrat from a foreign country, I had been an easy mark. Pizzaman had also been ignorant to the ways of the world when he left his affluent home to start his journey, and he too had been swindled by merchants. I could certainly believe someone had taken advantage of this kindhearted fellow just like they had me.

Pizzaman pitied me, so he paid the bill for my baked sempiol and tart. If he were a manga character, his appearance would have read as a son of an aristocrat—the sleazebag type who torments the protagonist's adorable childhood friend and receives swift comeuppance. In reality, he was an extremely considerate and gentle soul.

"Compared to him, that mana tool merchant is… I'll never…!" I shouted with teary eyes. I wanted to continue with *"I'll never forgive him!"* but held my tongue.

Gol was worriedly peering at my disheartened face. She was doubtlessly concerned by my state, having left her usual spot just behind me to walk by my side.

I had noticed something during my long discussion with Pizzaman. Gol more or less ignored any words said by anyone other than myself. She treated it as background noise. It had been the same when we were with Master Speria. Consequently, she didn't understand why I was so dejected.

I adjusted my previous statement. "I'll never…never, uh, I'll never understand why he thinks he can successfully hide that forehead of his with that strange haircut. You can bet on it."

I should refrain from voicing my anger toward the mana tool merchant in front of Gol, I thought. There was no need for her to suffer for my anxiety.

In any case, I still had one of those troublesome sorcery cores in my possession. I suppose you could say it was a blessing in disguise. Given what Pizzaman had said, I could get quite a bit of money from selling it, even if I only had the one.

At first, I hadn’t been particularly stressed about the money issue. These lost profits were a high price to pay for a lesson in trust, but at the end of the day, I could blame this colossal blunder entirely on my own ignorance. Although I didn’t want to admit it, on the eat-or-be-eaten battlefield known as business, I had been defeated by that barcode merchant’s prowess.
That was how I wanted to look at it now…
Ugh. It was no good.
Damn it! U-unforgivable! I really can’t forgive him! I won’t ever forgive that man for the rest of my life! I’ll be back, you bastard!
Filled with frustration, I glanced at Gol. If I only made a simple request, my partner might swiftly—
violently—handle my problem with the mana tool merchant and this whole problem could be settled.
No, not “might.” Gol *would* fulfill my wish beyond my wildest imaginings. I might even be dragged into paying compensation for whatever horror she wrought upon the mana tool shop.
And yet…no human in this town could stop Gol. And Gol would never refuse one of my requests.
But…
“That would be completely stupid… Ah, it can’t be helped! Besides, I’m not some junior high school student carrying a knife and putting on airs of badassery.” I laughed bitterly at myself as I stared up at the clear blue sky.
Hoping to clear my head, I took a leisurely stroll through the town, Gol at my side. We wandered through the pleasant streets, and my mood gradually recovered. Nothing good comes to those who constantly grumble and worry.
The man with a reputation for quickly shifting gears, that was me!
“Oh? Something smells good,” I said.
A sweet fragrance drifted on the wind. What was it? It reminded me of cookies. On the other side of the street, a stand was selling baked sweets.
With the prospect of more money on the horizon, I loosened my purse strings. I was now more interested in the appearance of cookies from another world than the lingering issues of gross monkey pebbles.
“Hey, Gol, wanna check that place out?” I asked my partner brightly as I started to cross the street.
However, I noticed a crowd forming down the way. They were gathering in the area near the mana tool shop. It appeared that during my wanderings, I had made my way back to the scene of my sorrows, although that wasn’t so strange given the town’s limited number of roads.
Suddenly, I heard something crashing and breaking on the other side of the crowd of onlookers, who began to chatter.
“What’s that? A fight…?” Intrigued, I casually joined the crowd. There, I caught a glimpse of the commotion from between other gawkers. “Ah! It’s him.”
I couldn’t believe it. In the center of this crowd was the mana tool merchant arguing with three other men.

You! Were you so unsatisfied with tricking me into selling my sorcery cores that you had to go and get yourself three more victims?! U-unforgivable! I won't forgive you! Fanned by righteous indignation, my anger toward the evil merchant was immediately reignited.

But on second glance, something was strange about this situation. The men standing directly in front of the merchant were clearly violating the noble sensibility espoused by Japan's Swords and Firearms Possession Control Law, what with the length of the sabers at their waists. A long-haired man, who seemed like the leader of these three, approached the terrified merchant and shouted something.

Although the merchant seemed to say something in return, his small stature shivered. His face never had much charm, but now it was even worse. His pallid complexion was soaked in cold sweat.

The long-haired man rolled his tattooed shoulders and snarled in a shrill voice to intimidate the crowd. Although the two men accompanying him had short, sensible hair, they were also carrying weapons that violated the spirit of the Swords and Firearms Possession Control Law. They stood on either side of the merchant to cut off any escape and silently applied bullying pressure.

They're the type of people that I, a lover of peace, despise the most: delinquents.

To think that such people existed in this world as well! I was a bit shocked. The first person I'd met, the golem who had become my partner, was a considerate and gentle soul. Following that, I met a true denizen of this other world, Master Speria, who was extremely intelligent and a splendid gentleman. Blessed with such wonderful encounters, I had rated the culture of this world to be practically the best. On a scale of one to ten, it would easily exceed a hundred points.

But now that I knew this world had such malicious merchants and devilish delinquents who did as they pleased, I unfortunately had to negatively adjust my rating.

As I was saddened by this turn, the long-haired punk's shrill voice rang in my ear. "Like I said, Mr. Chotos, it's basic etiquette to return borrowed money, right? So hurry up and pay what you need to pay, got it? We ain't runnin' a charity here."

"I-I'm begging you to wait just a little longer! I have a way to pay it back. Just a little more… Um, a few days. I'll make all the money back and return it!" said the merchant.

Ah, could this be what was known as a debt collection? Wait a minute…that barcode had debt?

"Y'know, if we let you get away with that kind of excuse, we'd lose out on business. Hey, you two!" the long-haired one said, cocking his chin.

That was a sign for the other two men to start knocking shelves down in the shop. Goods fell from the shelves to the floor, clattering loudly. Was this the source of the crashes I'd heard before?

The long-haired man plopped himself down on a fallen shelf, a lit cigarette in his mouth. As he blew smoke into the merchant's face, he said in a low voice, "Even if you don't got money, you've got somethin' else you can cough up, eh? Hurry up and bring out the deed to the shop."
I see. This was a real professional-grade punk. Magnificently played. Granted, I had no interest in emulating such vulgar tactics.
The merchant withdrew into his back room with a pale face, but he immediately returned with a leather bag in his hand. Excitedly, he extracted a black crystal from within it. His fingertips quivered in impatience and fear. "L-Look at this! It's an Earth Ogre's sorcery core—a special product you can circulate to the military. If you give me the chance to make a profit from it, I can pay back the debt to the Company!"
Ah! Wasn't that the monkey's sorcery core he bought off of me?! Damn barcode man! At the sight of that sorcery core, a tide of deep sadness and anger swept through my heart again. *Bastard! How are you going to take responsibility for this?!*
However, as he saw the black sorcery core, the long-haired man's eyes widened and his expression faintly changed. The two accompanying men had stopped their rampage. As expected for a professional punk gang, they were smooth operators.
"Heh, this is surprising… You've got your hands on somethin' genuinely nice," the long-haired man said. The corner of his mouth twitched, trying to hold back his broad grin.
I couldn't help but feel like something was wrong.
"All right, got it. We're not demons or anythin'. Hey, how 'bout this, Mr. Chotos? We'll hold off on claimin' the deed, as you've requested." With a nasty smile—made only nastier by that cigarette—the man rolled his shoulders and walked over to the merchant. Suddenly, he seized the leather bag. "But I'll be takin' care of this."
"Wha—?"
"Ha, it's pretty hefty. I'm sure there's a fair number of 'em. Yeah, this'll do. Keep up the good work and make sure you repay your debt."
"Wh-what are you saying?! Give that back!" The merchant turned bright red and grabbed at the long-haired man to recover the leather bag.
He was easily brushed aside. The punk kicked him into the air, and he tumbled to the floor violently. There, he curled up and didn't move again.
"This is righteous retribution…" I whispered as I took in the mess. I knew nothing of this world's customs, but it appeared that if you missed the deadline to repay your debts, a collector came around. You probably wouldn't be kicked every time, but this was a good lesson for a stubborn merchant. It was divine punishment for deceiving the purehearted me.
Lament and repent for your sin and greed, and respect the bite of pain!
"Then we'll take our leave, Mr. Chotos. No need to see us off. You've worked yourself too hard, so just lie down and take a break," the long-haired man snickered.

The three punks swaggered toward the exit.
However, even after all that, the merchant lunged at the leg of the long-haired man who was holding the leather bag. “Give it back! Please, give it back!”
Oh? This is a joke, right? You still wanna go at it, old man?
“Tsk, you’re annoying. Don’t get carried away, you filthy bald bastard!” said the long-haired man. In anger, he kicked the merchant in the abdomen with all his might. His foot sank into the man’s saggy side and made a blunt, horrid sound.
The merchant pressed his hand to his side and let out a pained groan. The punk curled the corner of his mouth that had the cigarette. He kicked and kicked, his hair becoming disheveled with each blow to the merchant’s body. The merchant continued to cling to the punk’s leg with his other hand.
What a stubborn man.
In any case, this confrontation had clearly reached some kind of limit. Someone ought to report the incident, or at least intercede.
But the merchant showed no sign of letting go, despite the merciless, never-ending kicks. The remaining hair on his head, which he had so carefully combed down, was now a sloppy mess. He looked like a fallen samurai.
Do you value money that much? Your greed is a real affliction.
All three punks were now kicking the cowering merchant. There was blood on his face. He immediately turned his head down, so the blood was only visible for a moment. Yet for some reason, that red smear burned into my retinas and refused to leave.
Well… Someone will come to help him soon. Of course they will. These punks are totally committing assault!
Even as I thought this, the merchant continued to cling to the punk’s leg, and he was kicked, and kicked, and kicked.
No one in the crowd moved. The merchant’s hand weakened.
H-hey. Why isn’t anyone going to help this man?
Why? Was it because he was a short, unattractive old man? Did they all really think there was no benefit in helping a poor-looking geezer? Or was it because he was a debt-ridden, dishonest merchant? Well, he *was* those things, but still. His character and his plight were two different matters.
I certainly did 100 percent believe he was a wicked merchant and a stupid-head for tricking me out of my sorcery cores. If I could, I would stuff a large number of firecrackers up his butt. But that resentment was purely business-oriented. I also wholeheartedly believed I had made my own decision and agreed to sell the sorcery cores according to my own flawed judgment.
However, the scene unfolding before me had a different underlying spirit. I mean, this man was just trying to stop a group of people from taking his belongings by force.
This was…wrong.

If nothing else, it was obvious these punks had no intention of turning the sorcery cores over to the people the merchant owed. They seemed more intent on embezzling.
Right! I mean, they hadn’t even written up a receipt! That had actually bothered me right from the start! If they didn’t write up a receipt, the merchant wouldn’t be able to make any claims about the sorcery cores if the punks feigned ignorance!
No matter how you looked at it, what was happening now was a crime.
Please, I beg you. Someone, anyone, please notify the authorities! I don’t know what organization handles public order in this world. Besides…this guy is being kicked way too much, right? He’s in so much pain, and he’s crying, and he’s covered in dirt.
……
Ah, I-I can’t. No more. I can’t endure this anymore.
I unconsciously took a step forward. My step made a heavy sound on the floor of the shop.
As a cultured man, I couldn’t continue watching from the sidelines as barbarians violently oppressed the weak. I wasn’t thinking about the consequences anymore. That was why I stepped between the bloodied man and the punks. Exactly like a knight protecting a maiden.
“Hey, wait right there, you—you fellows. Make sure you write him a proper receipt!”
The first person in this world I tried to protect from villains wasn’t a frail young lady or a beautiful damsel in distress—it was a short, debt-ridden, helpless, sloppy old man.

Chapter 4:
Chops and Pats

BECAUSE I GOT CAUGHT UP in the moment, I ended up confronting the three debt collectors. Thankfully, I knew what to do. I needed to employ logic to persuade the other party in a reasoned debate. There was no other option. As long as I could get these men to write up a receipt, the problem would be resolved.

Well, if possible, I also wanted them to pay for the merchant's medical bill.

The long-haired man in the center raised his shoulders and shouted to intimidate me. "Oh yeah?! What do you want?"

You don't need to yell when I'm this close. I can obviously hear you.

"Um, to be clear, I, um…I want you to write a receipt for that man having a rest there," I said.

Could they understand me? I was nervous. There was no guarantee my odd translation ability was advanced enough to deal with punk slang.

"You related to this trash heap?" he asked.

It was no good. My words weren't being properly conveyed. That much was clear from the man's irrelevant reply. To think that such an insurmountable wall stood between people of different worlds.

"No, no relation. As for our relation*ship*, um, I'm just a passerby. No, rather, you could say that I'm an old enemy…" I was hesitant to explain the truth. Also, I really had nothing to say for myself. I didn't have anything like an objective for saving this merchant. If I were rescuing a beautiful young lady, I might have tacked on a smug one-liner, but since my damsel was a slovenly old man…

The person I was attempting to save didn't understand the situation, either. He continued to cower on the ground, blinking up at me.

Three punks, an old man, and me—every one of us was strangely unable to grasp what was happening.

"Um…" I said. As the main source of confusion, I embarrassedly scratched the back of my head.

The long-haired man raked his eyes over my body. He stopped, seeming to recall something, and snorted. His eyes were now full of disdain. "Uh huh… You're one of 'em, eh? One of 'em spellcasters crawlin' here from the east."

Yes, correct, that about summed it up. I finally had a way to continue the conversation. "That's right."

"Ha! Your nose's so high in the air that I wondered who the hell you were. You're just some piece of scum loser!" The long-haired man opened his arms in triumph and spat out those words with a roar of laughter. I think the dramatic motion was meant to be some kind of appeal to the crowd.

"Runnin' away from the wars. Runnin' away from your country. Even publicly disgracin' yourself in another land. What kind of carefree life are

you livin'? You should've just fought and died! You don't got the status to be goin' around stickin' your nose in other people's business!"
"Wha…?" I faltered at this man's unbelievable lack of character.
You already know this, but I was not actually from the eastern part of this world. That was why, truthfully speaking, I wasn't the least bit fazed by the punk's insults. But if I really had been someone who escaped from those wars…I wondered what I would be feeling. I was sure it would be something like regret and sadness. I might have even cried. No one who becomes a refugee does it because they want to.
How could any member of the human race casually fling words that could carve out someone's still beating heart? Maybe it was due to a lack of imagination for subtler insults? Or did they truly believe it was fine to hurt anyone weaker than them?
"Heh. If you understand your place, hurry up and get lost, Mr. Runaway Spellcaster," the long-haired man said to my hesitation.
Then he extended his hand toward me. He probably intended to shove me away. No, maybe he was even trying to slap my shoulder in a belittling manner.
In the end, I never learned this man's intention. In that short moment, I felt a spike of murderous intent from my side that froze my surroundings.
At that moment, I finally remembered. Rather, until that moment, I had been completely oblivious. I had forgotten about my partner, Gol—the unnaturally protective, pure-white Greek statue who always stood just behind me, close enough to cuddle.
I believe the most important thing to consider here was not the fact that I had forgotten Gol's presence, but the reason *why* I had forgotten. It was true that I hadn't been thinking about anything besides keeping this merchant from being unreasonably punished. However, after that, there was another important factor, a factor no one here could have noticed: in other words, Gol had been hiding—even from me.
Usually, Gol stood in front of me at the least sign of danger, but she hadn't this time. As such, not one of the three men directly confronting me had shown any indication they were on guard, nor had they been wary of Gol lurking behind me. That was because, from the moment I intervened, Gol *hadn't* been behind me.
Instead, she had waited in another location, concealing her presence and holding her breath. As she accurately and calmly assessed the enemies' threat level and my psychological state, she waited for the opportunity to exterminate the opponent without breaking our "pinky promise."
Crack. It was a nasty sound, like something breaking.
Gol was holding the long-haired man's arm—the one he'd extended toward me. That arm was now bent in the opposite direction of the joint and limply, weakly dangled in an undesirable position. Gol had grabbed and broken it.
I suddenly recalled the exact words of the promise I had asked Gol to make when we entered the town.

“You can only attack someone if I give you permission or if they make a move on us first.”
“Ah…” I stared at the man’s broken arm as it hung in front of me. I-It’s true. He moved first. This man “made his move” in my direction. But that was too hasty, Gol! Your timing was way off! He only just moved his hand, and he just stuck it out toward me. This won’t do. No, it definitely won’t do! Such an itchy trigger finger could never be considered legitimate self-defense.
Besides, where the heck had Gol been this whole time?
From my point of view, she was currently standing to the left of the long-haired man. In battle, I expected to see her just in front of me; otherwise, she would be in her favorite spot just behind me. However, I didn’t think she had been in either of those places beforehand.
Could it be that Gol had blended in with the crowd…? I shuddered. Her actions reeked of criminal intent!
In the meantime, the long-haired man with the broken arm was screaming. Faster than my mind could comprehend his pain, Gol’s right hand flew upward faster than I could track it. This was bad. That was her chop—the move she always used to split the stone shell protecting a large monkey’s cervical vertebrae. She’d sliced through monkey armor like silken tofu. Ever since her battle against the shrine golems, who had relentlessly aimed for her neck, she had occasionally resorted to this technique.
There could be no doubt. Gol intended to chop through his neck.
No, no, no! You can’t kill him! At that moment, I wasn’t concerned about the punk or my rational objection to murder. Rather, I was concerned about Gol. I feared that if she killed this man in her present emotional state, she would lose some critical internal brake.
“Don’t kill him, Gol!” I shouted.
My outburst contained a great deal more anger than I expected. This was the first time I had ever used such a strong tone with her. There had been practically no need for it before. Additionally, in that instant, I realized the…how can I put it…? The somewhat lenient behavior I had taken toward her prior mistakes.
Gol’s arm froze mid-chop, as if she were scared. Her white hand was a breath away from the long-haired man’s neck. One side of the man’s long hair had been severed; it flopped from his shoulder to the ground.
I was literally cutting it close—I’d only made it in the nick of time. I let out a sigh of relief.
But it was too early to relax. Gol flipped her chop form into a backhand and slammed it onto her opponent’s shoulder. His bones broke with a dull snap.
“Auuughhhh!” The punk’s earsplitting shriek echoed throughout the town of Tibar.
As the man screamed, he fell to the ground. He now had an obliterated shoulder, an arm twisted out of shape, and a portion of his disheveled hair missing. He writhed on the ground like a worm. What a gruesome sight.

I cringed at the contorting punk and muttered, pale-faced, “O-oh, dear. I think ‘don’t kill him’ might have been too vague…”
Gol had obediently refrained from killing her opponent. But there hadn’t been any genuine self-restraint in the ultimate form of her retribution.
“Wha—? You’re a golem wielder?!”
The faces of the accompanying two punks changed, and they drew the sabers at their waists.
Or, well, to be precise, before they could remove the blades from their scabbards, a roundhouse kick from Gol sent them flying through the air. Blood sprayed everywhere. The kicked punks crashed violently to the ground.
My mind tried to escape reality as I stood there, staring at the unfolding tragedy and thinking, *Gol’s got some nice thighs, huh?*
Ah, I couldn’t do that. This wasn’t the time to be fantasizing! I panicked and hurried over to check on the punks half-buried in the destroyed wall of the shop. These two had lost quite a bit of blood and fainted, and one of them had a limp leg that bent in an unpleasant direction. But they were breathing, if faintly, and they were still twitching.
“Th-they’re alive…” I instinctively folded my hands in front of my chest as if I were praying. They’re breathing! They’re alive! Yay! Thank you, gods! Gol held back and didn’t kill them. She’s so well-behaved!
I was so elated by the living-to-dead ratio of the victims that I completely overlooked that, in the first place, it hadn’t been very well-behaved of Gol to kick before the two finished drawing their swords.
In any case, there was only one thing I could do at such a display of self-control. I pulled Gol close and hugged her as tightly as I could. Then I patted her head over and over.
“Gol, you’re such a good girl. You were able to hold back. So good. That’s right, you can’t kill the townspeople. Yes, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Good girl. Such a good girl!”
I knew about this tactic from dog training. When your dog does something good, you praise them as soon as possible after the deed is done. It is exceptionally important to do so when your dog does something that goes against their instincts, such as refraining from attacking or taking bitter medicine. You must amply reward such behaviors, thereby teaching them that you’re happy when they control themselves.
That was why I patted Gol so wildly. She fidgeted in my arms and eventually started to twitch, but I continued to pat her even when she seemed to go limp from exhaustion.
Congratulations, your Gol has learned a new move! *Restraint*.
By the time Gol started to cling to me, her knees weak, I raised my head and noticed the punks beginning to get up.
To be clear, the two Gol had kicked were still unconscious and on the brink of death. They were in no way capable of walking on their own. However, several of their punk comrades had come by to help the injured and lend

them their shoulders. Given the prior context of this situation, these new punks had probably been stationed nearby to ensure the debtor didn't escape.
"Haaah…haaah… Damn…it…" the long-haired man groaned. His complexion was terrible, and he was drenched in cold sweat as he held his broken side. He dragged himself unsteadily toward the street.
What phenomenal willpower. If I had those kinds of injuries, I definitely wouldn't be able to move.
The long-haired man noticed my admiring gaze and growled bitterly with a twisted face, "Y-you… You'll definitely regret this, golem wielder. I'll get you back."
Eh? Wait, am I going to be sued? That was really bad. A lawsuit in this scenario would be 100 percent bad for me. I'd absolutely, definitely lose, for sure.
I shuddered at the thought of my inevitable loss in court while the long-haired man sent me a final poisonous backward glance and resumed staggering away. However, after a few steps, his legs gave way and he tumbled. His body collapsed on the road and weakly convulsed, and his comrades were forced to rush over and drag him along as they left.
"Did he faint from the pain? Well, yeah, I suppose that would happen…" I said. It was clear Gol had taken it too far. *I'm truly sorry, nameless punk.*
As I apologized in my heart of hearts, I watched the miserable, unconscious man with a broken upper half of a body and ruined haircut be hauled away. I wondered how he would recover. This world was blessed with healing spells, so I wanted to believe they could do something for him.
At roughly the same time as the punks withdrew, the crowd dispersed. Everyone's expressions had grown stark, and they scattered as if they were trying to escape. Even the shopkeepers on the other side of the street all rushed to close their shops and tightly lock their shutter doors.
"Eh? What's going on…?" I asked.
The only ones left were Gol and myself, standing silently in front of the ruined shop. At my feet were the punk's smoking cigarette and the leather bag filled with the monkeys' sorcery cores. Both had fallen when Gol broke the long-haired man's shoulder with her backhand.
Oh, and the mana tool merchant was also lying there.
As I stamped the lit end of the cigarette under my shoe, I shot a side glance at the man on the ground. "Hey, you okay?"
I had asked in good faith, but he continued to cower on the ground as if he hadn't heard. His bloody lip trembled, and he muttered, "Oh, how could this have happened? Now you've done it. We're all doomed…"
"I don't think my voice is reaching him at all," I said to myself.
Nevertheless, this man's face was in really bad shape. Because he had been senselessly beaten by those three, it was covered in bruises while blood dripped from his nose and the cuts in his mouth. With his thin, disheveled

hair, he no longer merely *looked* like a fallen samurai. He could have been mistaken for a *flawless replica* of a fallen samurai.

If I could have used any healing spells, I would have healed him out of pity… for a fee, of course.

I'm so sorry, sir, but I belong to a strict creed that says I may only use Earth spells.

Chapter 5:
Underworld and Pseudonym

NEARLY AN HOUR HAD PASSED since the debt collector punks had left.
Because I couldn't stand looking at the ruined state of the shop, I'd been returning the scattered goods on the floor to their shelves. Gol was helping me. What a good girl.
Hey, you, the fallen samurai over there. How about you stop cowering on the floor and take a hint from my wonderfully well-mannered Gol?
"Jeez, how much longer are you gonna keep acting like that…?" I said to the shivering man on the floor before returning to arranging the mana tools on the shelf.
By cleaning the shop, I was able to confirm something. Despite the relatively splendid and spacious appearance of the shop's layout, there weren't a lot of goods. From the moment I'd stepped in, I hadn't seen any customers but myself, and because the shelves were empty, it had felt hollow.
Being unfamiliar with this world, I had thought this was normal. But in reality, the reason the shop couldn't be properly restocked was debt. That merchant probably hadn't even had enough money to properly buy the sorcery cores from me. That was no doubt why he had resorted to such a desperate scam.
The mana tools littered on the floor were all small objects, like toys. As I returned them to the shelves, I picked up a strange one that looked like a nut and bolt. While I was turning it over, I felt a gaze from the front of the shop.
I raised my head and my eyes widened. "What's with those guys…?"
A crowd of men stood on the street out front, glaring at me. It was a bizarre scene. They were all extremely unrefined; they had the same style as those three punks from before. While some wore sabers and short swords at their waists, some carried crude weapons like clubs. They looked like a real gang. Furthermore, there were a lot of them—over fifty at my best guess.
Inside the shop, Gol silently moved to stand in front of me.
Oh, hey, Gol, are you going to fight these guys? Wait a moment. You can't act so recklessly!
"Ha, your shop's depressing as usual." A deep voice came from within the crowd, and a large man sauntered heavily forward. The gold armor on his body was of an unfamiliar shape, and he wore a large sword on his back. Actually, it was an *abnormally* large sword. Its length exceeded an average person's height, and it was needlessly thick and wide. Could such a weapon be swung by human means? Was that man the descendant of a gorilla or something? I frowned quizzically at this weapon that was too absurd to be useful in battle.

The big man with the comically big sword attempted to intimidate me with his threatening voice. “You’re him? The spellcaster and wielder of the red-eyed shrine golem?”
Yup, most likely. I wanted to respond with something like a gallant “Yeah, that’s me,” but was that all right? Was it okay to call myself a spellcaster? I could only use Earth spells, and beginner ones to boot. I was a complete amateur who could only make stuff like pebbles, golems, and spears. If I dared call myself a bona fide spellcaster at such a puny level, wouldn’t I be reprimanded by professionals? Wouldn’t they snicker at me?
“And what if I was? Can I help you with something?” I neither admitted to nor denied the accusation. That felt safe.
The moment I responded, the tension in the punk crowd spiked for some reason. Huh? Was there something wrong with the way I phrased it?
“Heh, you shameless bastard. Seein’ as you’ve been patiently waitin’ for us here in the open, I gotta say you’ve got some damn nerve. You must be feelin’ good because you won a petty victory with your golem over there, eh? Sorry to disappoint, but you’re out of luck now that you’ve gone and laid a hand on the buddy of a spell warrior like me,” the man declared.
The punks cheered in agreement, getting frightfully excited. “Yeah! Big Dazu’s the strongest Blood spell wielder in the underworld! Your light-class golem’ll be broken in half with a single blow! Do it, Big Dazu!”
I listened to their cries and recalled a passage in *Introduction to Spellcrafting I*. “Blood spells…”
Having read the book back in the basin hideout, I knew a bit about the Blood attribute. If I remembered correctly, it allowed its users to “boil their blood,” and Blood spells could strengthen bodies and improve healing. Since the effects of these spells enhanced physicality, spellcasters with an aptitude in the Blood attribute were absurdly strong in close combat. Therefore, they could be difficult opponents on the battlefield. Additionally, spellcasters who specialized in this attribute were categorized differently from normal spellcasters, gaining the distinction of being called “spell warriors.” Notably, there were other subcategories of spellcasters who used specialized spells. For example, I was sometimes referred to as a “golem wielder,” which was the Earth attribute version of a specialized spellcaster.
Jeez, just the name “spell warrior” was super cool already! Of course, I’d thought so from the beginning. That was why when I’d discerned my attribute, I had also tested to see if I possessed any aptitude in the Blood attribute. The result had been, of course, not an iota of talent.
The large man in front of me *was* a spell warrior, though—a job I had given up on obtaining. Furthermore, he was “the strongest in the underworld.” Another amazing title.
But what a turn of events this was! This large spell warrior was likely some kind of boss to those three punks with whom we’d had our earlier dispute. I had a lot to say about those guys’ violent behavior and attempt to embezzle

when they were only supposed to be collecting on a debt. Nevertheless, it was most likely also true that the trembling man beside me, whose pale face had since turned a color past purple, owed these guys some serious money. Plus, Gol had severely injured this spell warrior's employees before they could defend themselves. Given that, I was at least responsible for paying their medical fees. I might even be forced to pour my entire fortune into expensive medical bills and other compensation.

Ah, well. That was fine. I would surrender and accept my punishment. My partner's carelessness was completely my fault. I was prepared to take on the tragic burden of handing over my last cent.

"I got it. State your business. I'll hear you out," I said.

"My business? That's already been determined. Two spellcasters wagin' their honor on the line as they go head-to-head—a fight to the death!" the large man exclaimed. The punks of this world were more violent than I had expected.

At that moment, the large man began the battle before I could say anything.

"Raarrghhh! *Armor of the Lion*!" He cast his spell with an echoing roar. At the same time, an aura of crimson steam erupted from his body. All his muscles swelled to an incredible degree, covering his entire form like hardened pieces of armor.

A-amazing. I've never seen a guy like this, even among foreign wrestlers.

Fired up, the large man drew his sword from his back. He swung the blade —which was practically an iron log—with terrifying ease. Then he shouted in triumph, "I'll chop you up, golem wielder! You'll regret standin' up to me…in hell!"

"Uhh…" I uttered, unthinking. At that moment, I realized a horribly dreadful thing. This large man was standing on the street in front of the shop, so there was still quite some distance between us. Furthermore, he was in the middle of the road and surrounded by a large crowd. As such, when he made this bold, provocative pose, he stepped out past them, toward me, and pointed his sword horizontally right at my face.

In other words, he *made his move* toward me.

This was bad. I knew it was, but Gol moved before I could say anything to stop her.

She stepped forward like a gust of wind from a hurricane. She'd been waiting for this exact moment.

The white elf shot forward like a bullet to challenge the huge giant of a man. The immaculate comet of her fist sunk into the man's face with a resounding thud.

The colossal mass of muscle that was a man flew backward like a crumpled piece of paper. His body drew a high parabola as he soared over the street. The members of the punk gang, the mana tool merchant, and I all stood there in a daze, only able to watch the ball of meat fly into the sky.

The large man careened back down to earth and smashed with all that momentum head-first into some empty barrels piled up in front of the shop

across the street. Most of the barrels shattered from the impact of his fall. Broken shards of wood and dust danced through the air. At last, he slammed into the wall and stopped moving altogether.
No one could say anything. Silence choked the town. Wooden shards clattered over the street.
“I…”
I’ve done it now! I forgot to revise the instructions I gave to Gol! This was absolutely my fault. I want to die! Crushed by the weight of my sin, I hung my head.
However, I shouldn’t have done that. It was utterly the wrong move to take my eyes off of Gol. For those brief few seconds, I once more tried to escape from reality. But when I raised my head to face my fate, pandemonium lay before me.
“Wh-what happened here…?”
A punk was sprawled on the ground at my feet, covered in blood and writhing. And another punk, and another. What was this? What had happened?
I was confused for only a moment: Gol. In the few seconds I’d not been looking…
The punks lying on the ground were all moaning in pain and had lost gouts of blood, and their limbs were bent at dreadful angles. In a word, it was terrible. But at least they were moving.
“Th-thank goodness. They’re not dead…” I said. It seemed Gol had held back yet again.
As I gradually regained my composure, I conducted another survey of our surroundings. The street in front of the shop was dyed red with blood. During those few seconds, all the punks within a certain radius had been severely assaulted and left in a half-dead state. The number of casualties was close to half of the entire group. Someone had made unbelievably quick work of them.
The presumed culprit, Gol, stood silently beside me. She wore a blithe, innocent look, like she had no idea what had just happened.
No, Gol. I definitely won’t be fooled by that face. I saw you sneakily wiping the blood off your hand!
The remaining half, the uninjured punks, were frozen in place as if they had been crucified. No one dared utter a word. They stared at me with petrified expressions.
No, wait. Why are you looking at me*? Gol was the one who nearly killed your comrades.* Although, sure, I held responsibility as the golem’s owner, I hadn’t done anything to them myself.
However, across the board, the expressions of the punks staring at me were those of fear and despair. They looked as though they’d beheld some kind of evil demon.
Anyway, this situation was starting to seem kind of…not good.

The large man, who was supposed to be the leader of this group, was still buried in the wall among the barrel wreckage, twitching and spasming. First, we needed to tend his injuries so we could peacefully discuss an end to hostilities. If I didn't own up to responsibility and take control of the situation, it'd definitely break bad.

I walked across the street and headed for the large man. The surviving punks made a path for me. I felt like the prophet Moses parting the sea, though this was a dirty sea of filthy punks.

"N-noo! F-forgive me. Just spare my life! Please! I-I was wrong!" the large man cried. Half his face was swollen and in dreadful shape. He shed tears as he trembled.

I knew Gol had held back, but it didn't change the fact that her attack had landed directly on this guy's face. I was surprised he was still conscious. Perhaps he owed that to his Blood spell before. I wouldn't underestimate it again. It was quite a dangerous spell. With so much defensive ability, this guy was likely able to repel any average physical attack. I understood why he had been confident enough to do battle with a golem.

As much as I was interested in this guy's abilities, Gol nursed no such curiosities and brandished her right arm at the trembling man.

Ah, that was no good. Gol wanted to throw another punch.

"Gol, no. Be a good girl and stay."

If you hit him again, he'll probably die.

In any case, it was fortunate he had retained consciousness. This way, we could still have a discussion. However, where could I start? First, I needed to both address my issue with the way his subordinates collected debt, and then clarify the misunderstanding on both sides. Apologizing for Gol's repeated assaults would come after.

"Listen up. You see that man over there, shivering on the floor of the mana tool shop? Yeah, about his debt…" I said.

"I-I understand. I understand! We took on a request from the Paisley Company. We're only here to collect the payment. We'll withdraw and wash our hands of the matter. We'll never, ever lay a hand on that shop again. So, please, please don't kill me!" he pleaded. His face was swollen with broken bones and torn muscle, and he bawled while painfully sniffling through a nosebleed.

Hey, stop making such a scene. People will misunderstand. I have no intention of killing anyone—

"I really didn't know he had someone like you in his family! I won't touch anyone in this town again. I'll leave right away, okay? I beg of you. Please don't kill me. Please don't kill me!" he cried.

I was so frightened by his shouts that I drew back my hand.

You see, I had taken hold of his collar to check the state of his facial injuries, but it *had* looked like I was grabbing him by the neck. The moment I let go, the large man staggered out of my reach and escaped with unsteady feet in the direction of the western gate.

His subordinates were dumbfounded as they watched him flee. They followed him nevertheless, dragging the groaning injured with them.
I guess they're pretty close if they're not leaving any man behind.
"A-a nightmare…" One of the escaping underlings muttered this in a vacant-eyed daze, but it left a strange impression on me.

After that day, a name echoed through the underworld of the empire: the "Nightmare of Tibar," a dangerous harbinger of atrocity—the wielder of the red-eyed golem.
I only learned of this name much later.

***

The gang of punks fled town as if they were a vanishing typhoon. The wind whooshed through the empty street. All that remained was the giant sword dropped by that large man. Nothing else was left.
"What should we do with this sword…?"
I stood dumbfounded in front of this neglected blade when a resident of the town walked up to me. It was a grandma wearing a shabby hood and using a short cane to support herself.
I recognized her at once. She was the gentle grandma I had encountered as I entered the town, and she had given me a piece of candy. She had also told me the mana tool shop's location.
"Thank you, young man," the grandma said. She stroked my head with fingers as thin as twigs and smiled. "The mana tool merchant had to take on that horrible debt to pay for his sick daughter's medicine. Everyone in the town was worried. But we were all afraid of those terrifying thugs. No one could say anything."
"I see. So that's what happened… Wait, 'daughter'?" I broke off midway and my eyes widened. Grandmother, what did you say, perhaps? Did you say "daughter"? That old man has a daughter of marriageable age?!
No way! My life in another world had thus far been stubbornly filled with monkeys, old men, and dinosaurs, but had my "romance with a girl" flag finally been raised?
I couldn't believe it. But could I? Was this for real? Like that cliché where a man saves a father from criminals in the name of justice and begins a bittersweet love story with his adorable daughter? Was such a convenient dreamy love story really happening to me?! Amazing. This was too amazing!
I was frozen in astonishment, my eyes huge, when the grandma gave me another piece of candy.
"Ah, thank you very much." I returned to my senses and bowed.
The grandma also gave Gol a piece of candy. How kind.
Gol showed some hesitation as the grandma handed her the candy, however. She stared restlessly at the treat as it was presented to her. This was unusual.

“Good for you, Gol. Go ahead and accept it,” I said with a smile.
Since Gol couldn’t eat the candy, I would take it from her later. In return, I’d make sure to wipe her body down until she shone.
The strange and gentle sweetness of the candy spread through my mouth. It tasted of some kind of nostalgic fruit.

Chapter 6:
Beloved Daughter and Romance Flag

LET'S BE CLEAR. There was no damn romance flag.

Let me introduce you to the daughter of the mana tool merchant, with whom I was having a friendly chat. She was a cute girl with light chestnut-colored hair. She was single, young, and most definitely a beauty. And, of course, she was female.

Her name was Teru. A lovely name. She was currently sitting on my lap. When I asked her, "How old are you?" she shyly responded by spreading her five fingers and saying, "Five."

Five years old… Hey. Hey, Mister. What is this? What does she mean by five?!

She was a proper lady, despite her youth. She treated me with utmost respect. But you know, most people would assume that a man who looked as old as that merchant would have a daughter no younger than twenty. What a useless guy…

Anyway, sweet Teru wasn't like her evil merchant of a father. She was an extremely good-natured child. To tell you the truth, I was relieved. She was genuinely happy talking to and smiling at an oddball like me. What a wonderful kid. Genetics sure do work in mysterious ways.

I was certain she took after her deceased mother. Apparently, the poor woman had contracted the same illness poor Teru had endured and died a year later after months of futile treatment. After she died, the mana tool merchant had borne the debt for the sake of their young daughter. The trials and travails of single fatherhood had left him visibly aged and bald from stress.

Teru was a healthy kid now, though I didn't doubt she'd been ill. I didn't know the average development cycle of children in this world, but from what I'd seen around Tibar, it didn't seem that different from the one I was familiar with. There was an abundant supply of food, which I'm sure helped. Despite this, Teru was quite small. When I first saw her, I thought she was younger than a kindergartener. I could probably chalk that up to all the days she'd spent confined to her bed.

When I thought of how her deceased mother must have felt, knowing she was leaving her frail little daughter with such an absolutely unreliable and stupid merchant…

"Jeez, I'm gonna cry…" I muttered.

From my seat on the sofa, I absentmindedly gazed out the window to my left. The golden light of the setting sun filtered through the characteristically cloudy glass-paned windows unique to this world. At present, I was in the mana tool merchant's home. It was located deep in a secluded neighborhood several alleys away from the main street where the

punks had caused an uproar. The merchant had invited me to his home to stay for a while.
This proposal was actually a godsend. Although I had enough money to stay at an inn, I still didn't know my left from my right in this world, including how to properly budget. In any case, I had no reason to refuse, since my accommodations would be free.
The man's home was rather large. It was a two-story building, relatively rare for this town. Between this show of prior wealth and how well-known his current straits seemed to be, I wasn't surprised he'd become a target for nefarious folks.
"And then, Mr. Nemaki, I, um…" Teru said.
For some time now, she had been sitting on my lap and energetically swinging her small legs as she overflowed with little-girl talk. At first she had been shy with me, but by now she had opened her heart. What a beautifully honest child. I kept thinking about how I just couldn't see her as the child of that evil man.
"So, then, when I get bigger, I'm gonna be a camchi seller. And then, um, yeah…" she continued.
"Heh, a camchi merchant, huh? Wonderful. I'm sure you'll be a great one."
Of course, I had no idea what a "camchi" could possibly be. However, if it meant she wouldn't be inheriting her father's dishonest shop, it was indubitably a worthy goal. *Good luck, Teru. I sincerely support your dream*.
Teru's big round eyes sparkled, and she continued with a bashful tone, "And so, I'm gonna, um…"
She fidgeted as she rocked her feet. Unlike adults, it takes more effort for a child to summon the words they want to say. Then Teru raised her sweet, smiling face and said, "I'm gonna be Mr. Nemaki's bride!"
"Oh, I'd be honored," I said, surprised.
She was quite a passionate lady, and she had my thanks. Those pure, kind words had come from her heart. But I already knew that in two dozen years or so, she would happily leave the nest with some other fortunate man.
"Really. It's an honor," I said. Full of paternal heartbreak, I gently brushed Teru's fluffy hair. Her eyes closed as she giggled in embarrassment.
At that moment, I felt a wave of terrible unease coming from somewhere on my right. When I turned to look, Gol, who had been sitting next to me, was slowly reaching toward the child. For some reason, her white fingers trembled violently.
"Hm…? What are you doing, Gol?"
How strange. She was the only thing I could see. So what exactly was emitting that volatile bloodlust? I definitely felt it. I was nearly convinced some invisible mana beast had appeared next to me. Although, from a rational perspective, there was no way a mana beast could be inside the house.
It seemed that after the long series of fights I had endured since coming to this world, I had become hypervigilant. That ominous presence was likely

my imagination. I mean, my Gol would never do anything terrible to sweet little Teru. In fact, Gol usually treated me like an infant, so to me, she gave off an incredibly maternal impression. She probably loved small children.
I see. She's reaching out to stroke Teru's head. Gol really does like kids.
"Yeah, I think Gol will make a good mother," I said. Well, I didn't know if golems could give birth.
Nevertheless, after I spoke, Gol's violently trembling hand suddenly halted. Then she stroked Teru's forehead.
Ah, what an absolutely beautiful sight. Bathed in the warm light of sunset coming through the window, an immaculate statue caressed an innocent child. The solemnity of this scene exceeded that of the image of the Holy Mother depicted by Raphael.
But something about it still bothered me. "Hey, Gol. Don't you think you're going at it a little rough?"
Whenever Gol touched me, it was with the gentle care required to handle delicate glasswork or a treasured possession. Right now, though…
Well, Teru seemed delighted by the bit of roughhousing, so I guessed it was fine.

Then I noticed another uneasy presence. The source of this one was sitting on the sofa across the table from us. It was the mana tool merchant.
“So, you got something you want to say to me?” I asked.
Right after Teru had childishly proposed to me, the veins on the man’s wide forehead began to twitch. At this rate, he’d succumb to an early death from high blood pressure.
I decided to provoke my hated archenemy, the merchant, in the name of shortening his lifespan. “Just as I thought. Your daughter is nothing like her incompetent father—she is an excellent judge of character. Wise beyond her years.”
Blood rushed up the man’s head, turning his scalp pink. “Don’t get the wrong idea, you hear me? I’m grateful for what you did for me this afternoon. But listen here, this is a completely different matter. I won’t give you my Teru.”
“Hmph, how foolish. Who she marries is a question only she can answer.”
Ha ha, what a fool of a father! He was beyond help if he was getting worked up over the sugary clichés of girlhood.
No matter how you dote on her, Teru will one day leave you for some stranger from who knows where! Serves you right.
Of course, I would primarily be happy on account of *her* happiness.
And, I suppose, on the day before her wedding, I would listen to whatever rambling sorrows the merchant had left. I would expect him to treat me to an open bar’s worth of alcohol in the meantime. Ridiculing his bitter face would make for a magnificent accompaniment to my drink.

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A pile of unfinished documents and an inkwell lay on top of the desk adjacent to the living room. The mana tool merchant and I had left the sofa to sit there.
“I truly appreciate your help before,” he said. “Allow me to introduce myself again. My name is Chotos. As you know, I’m the proprietor of the mana tool shop here in Tibar.”
“Then I’ll also reintroduce myself as well. I’m Nemaki Dasai. The one who’s holding your daughter over there is my partner, Gol. Her real name is Goltarou.”
The man named Chotos twitched at my statement. “I see. The Barbarian Queen Goretaru… I know they say nature follows name, but I guess choosing to name her for the resplendent goddess of slaughter and jealousy wasn’t just for show.”
Mister, you, too?! Who keeps making you people say that fake name?! Her name isn’t Goretaru; it’s Goltarou! I was proud to be the one who had named her, and I wouldn’t yield to these false monikers. My heart had broken when I first faced this trouble with Master Speria, but this time, I

would make the people of the world acknowledge my fantastic naming sense. I'd start with Mr. Chotos. He would be the first step in my plan to conquer the world with my incomparable flair for names.
I made sure to emphasize the proper pronunciation of each syllable as I spoke. "My Gol-ta-rou is strong, after all. Those punks were no match for her."
"You call them punks, but…everyone in Tibar knew of their leader—that behemoth, Dazu the Swordbreaker. He's an outlaw without equal. Well, I suppose he and his gang were nothing more than punks against that Goretaru of yours."
This guy keeps calling her Goretaru. What a stubborn fellow.
"Hmph, even if there were a thousand men like him, *Gol*ta*rou* would knock them out simultaneously. After all, my Gollll-ta-roooou is the strongest being in the world," I said.
"You've got quite the confidence in your Goretaru's abilities."
Argh! Like I said, it's not Goretaru! Say it with me, my guy! Gol. Ta. Rou! Why can't you understand something so mind-numbingly simplistic?
But I wouldn't give up. Not yet.

Ten minutes passed in much the same way.
"I…surrender. Goretaru it is… Mister, you call her whatever you like…"
"Huh? What are you going on about?"
All my efforts were in vain. In the end, I couldn't get Mr. Chotos to correctly refer to her as "Goltarou." My heart had once again been broken.
Mr. Chotos was confused by my exhaustion, but he cleared his throat, fixed his posture, and looked me in the eye. "Nemaki, I formally apologize for appraising your Earth Ogre sorcery cores at such an unfairly low price. I'm truly sorry. For all you have done…if you wish to buy back your sorcery cores at the price I initially stated, I freely offer you the chance."
Mr. Chotos wore an earnest expression as he placed the leather bag of sorcery cores on the desk between us. I had made sure to recover it before we left. Nonetheless, I had sold the contents of this bag, so presently, they were this man's rightful belongings.
"I see. Buying them back at the same price…"
"I'm sorry… With my business in such a state, it's the best I can do." Mr. Chotos bit his lip and cast his eyes downward.
I folded my arms and thought it over. This proposal meant I would buy back the sorcery cores with the very money Mr. Chotos had initially given me for them. In short, we would each return to our starting states.
Although I was unfamiliar with business as usual in this world, this at least seemed to be a valid compromise. What was more, I highly doubted Mr. Chotos, who was up to his neck in debt, could financially compensate me in any other way.
"Okay. I have no objections. I'll let this matter slide." I nodded.

Luckily, I hadn’t spent any of the money, as Pizzaman had paid for my lunch. Therefore, the proceeds from the initial sale were as yet untouched. If I returned the money to the man in front of me, the case would be settled. The generosity of my classmate, Pizzaman, had saved me a great deal of trouble. *Thanks, Pizzaman. I’ll definitely have to treat you the next time we meet.*

“This is the payment I received this morning. Please confirm the amount.” I placed the relevant coins on the table.

In exchange, Mr. Chotos picked up the leather bag of sorcery cores and held it out to me. I firmly accepted it.

With this, the case was closed. I moved to put the leather bag into my larger shoulder bag. But for some reason, Mr. Chotos refused to let go.

“Hey. You done?” I asked.

“A-ah, s-sorry. I wasn’t aware.”

“There’s no way you weren’t *aware*!” I snatched the leather bag away. Jeez, what a greedy jerk. I was getting really tired of this guy.

As I was putting the leather bag away, I stopped. Something was off.

“Hey, mister. You know, for some reason, it feels like this bag is lighter than I remember.”

Cold sweat appeared on Mr. Chotos’s forehead. On closer inspection, he was gripping a black sorcery core under the desk.

Hey, don’t think you can fool me, you damn barcode!

I grappled for the sorcery core in his hand.

He resisted as he cried, “For the future! Please, Nemaki, please! Just this one!”

Though I mercilessly recovered my stolen goods, I also sighed and rested my elbow on the desk. After all, I knew the reason for this man’s repulsive actions. The debt collector punks had withdrawn, but his debt hadn’t disappeared with them. Their leader, the big fellow, had said they were hired by some company to collect on the debt. I believed he said the “Paisley Company.” “Paisley” sounded like some kind of Western clothing brand… Well, I didn’t really care.

Mr. Chotos had most likely borrowed from this Paisley Company. In other words, as long as the debt to the actual company went unpaid, another group of debt collectors would eventually turn up. That was why he was being so persistent with my sorcery cores. His problems had yet to be resolved. My accidental intervention had only delayed the inevitable.

That wasn’t to say I didn’t have an *opinion* about a company that would utilize such a criminally inclined and violent group to collect money from a petty merchant who had lost his wife to disease and had to care for his sickly daughter. But borrowing money in and of itself fell within the realm of reasonable economics. The unfortunate long-haired punk whose bones Gol had broken had been right when he said that returning borrowed money was basic etiquette. I agreed that the premise was sound. In the end, if Mr. Chotos suffered in debt to a company, that was his own fault.

Well, then again, he had been desperate to buy medicine for his dying wife and daughter…
N-no! I wouldn't be tricked a second time. I was sure there was nothing pitiable about this greedy and shortsighted barcode man.
I once again let out a deep sigh. My gaze fell to the leather bag in my hand, and I peered through the opening at a portion of the black crystals glittering inside.
I had picked up these stones on the roadside to make some easy money. Picking them up had been simple impulse, and obtaining them hadn't required much work. To think these boring stones could make such a difference in the furious battle between life and death… I began to feel somewhat indecisive.
"There's something I would like to consult with you about. Exactly how many of these sorcery cores would you need to completely pay off your debt?" I asked.
"Four…no, three would be enough," he replied.
Was that really all he needed? It was a surprisingly low number. Although I hadn't counted the original total number of sorcery cores, I believed it was around thirty. I had been under the impression he would need to sell off the entire bag to repay what he owed.
I see. So just three would be fine.
"Hm? Three…?" My shoulder twitched. "The necessary number is three, right? Hey, wait a second, you barcode."
"Bahcode? What's that?"
"It's, um, a word for the few remaining hairs on your head, duh."
"What did you say? I ain't bald!"
"Huh? Are you kidding? If your head were a battlefield, commanders on either side could see their troops advancing clear to the other end."
"Retract that! My hair's luxurious!"
"Ugh, I can't believe you make me look at you! As if that weird hairstyle could cover it up! In the first place, if you're a man, your hair thins as you age, and it makes you look dignified! Refined! Have some confidence in your years and live proudly—wait, no!"
Stop that, self! I'd been riled and unintentionally strayed off-topic.
I slammed both my hands on the desk. "If you're telling me the truth, three sorcery cores would've been enough to end your troubles, but you bargained down the price to squeeze them all out of me? Hey!"
"Ah…"
"You lying liar who lies! You hopeless barcode!" I grabbed the man's collar and shook him roughly.
"Wh-whoa, I-I'm sorry! I'm truly sorry about that! I really didn't think an idiot who would fall for such outlandish lies and sell all their sorcery cores for dirt cheap could even exist!" The hair on the crying middle-aged man's head became disheveled, once again transforming him into a fallen samurai.
Argh! Are you apologizing or dissing me? Pick one!

“Jeez…” I let go of the man’s lapels and sighed for a third time. I took out several sorcery cores from within the leather bag and dropped them on the desk. After pondering for a bit, I added another. “That makes four… Okay.”
I stared at the four black sorcery cores lined up on the desk. After gathering them in a pile, I pushed them toward the man.
“You can have these.”
“Wha…? D-do you mean it?”
“Yes. But don’t misunderstand me. This isn’t a donation. One of these sorcery cores is for the cost of repairing the shop. When my Gol kicked out the debt collectors, she made a huge mess and destroyed the wall.” With an extremely serious and stern expression, I tapped my finger on the desk. “The other three are an investment. Use them to pay back your debt and reorganize your financial management. I’ll have you return the money with plenty of interest.”
Of course, I was lying. This was just to make sure he didn’t feel spoiled. I had absolutely no intention whatsoever of staying in this town long enough to see the distant future when his shop, currently on the verge of bankruptcy, sprang back to life enough to actually repay me.
Mr. Chotos’s eyes kept darting between my face and the four sorcery cores on the desk. He shut his eyes tightly and tried to speak, but for a moment it just sounded like something was stuck in his throat.
“I-I’m sorry.” When he accepted the sorcery cores, his hands trembled like an alcoholic patient’s. His dirty face crinkled as he sobbed with a runny nose. “Ugh, waah. Zorry. I’m r-really zowwy… D-danks. Denk you, Nemegii… I’m zowwy for twicking youu…”
“Ew. Hey, that’s disgusting. Stop crying. If you don’t, I’ll take them back.”
“Waa, I dun’t dink I can stup muhselff…”
“What does that even mean…?”
Please, I’m begging you, get a hold of yourself. The future of your small five-year-old daughter depends on you keeping it together.
Yeah, that’s right, see, if this man’s debt were left standing, a miserable future awaited his daughter, Teru. This was a world where vicious punks had no problem throwing their weight around. If the debt remained, the debt collectors would no doubt sell Teru off to some shady store when she came of age. If that happened, I would have no choice but to take responsibility and make her my wife to save her. I didn’t want to see that girl’s tears, and I couldn’t stand the thought of seeing her live such a sad life.
Yeah. Nudging Mr. Chotos along the path to repaying his debt was all for the sake of the future of adorable Teru, who I would henceforth treat like my own little sister. This man’s future was just adjacent. He was inconsequential.
I simply couldn’t abandon a disheartened, middle-aged single father taking care of his child. The kid was the important part, so I—don’t want you to

misunderstand. It was the kid! I didn’t feel bad or anything! D-don’t be stupid!
“W-waah…” Mr. Chotos was face down on the table, still crying.
I didn’t know how many times I’d sighed at this pitiful father sobbing while holding the sorcery cores in his hand, but I shrugged in exasperation. Then, for no real reason, I turned to look at his daughter, his most treasured possession.
Since poor old baldy and the golem moocher were having the ugly conversation of miserable men, which could only have a tremendously detrimental effect on a child’s development, I’d made Gol keep Teru occupied on the sofa in the living room.
From here, they almost looked like sisters. Teru was fair-skinned all around, and it went without saying that Gol was pure white.
Speaking of, Gol had been staring at me for a while now, while roughly rubbing Teru’s head. Was she trying to get my attention? Well, Teru was still squealing in excitement, so there probably wasn’t anything to worry about there.

Chapter 7:
The First Night

THAT NIGHT, I finally took a warm bath for the first time in ages. I could barely believe Mr. Chotos's house even had one. The bathroom was constructed from wood and tile and was quite splendid. If forced to describe the bathtub's unique shape, I would liken it to a drum container.
Apparently, a relatively high-grade mana tool was required to install it.
Come to think of it, what exactly *was* a mana tool? Was it something I could use, too? The only mana tool I'd seen in use so far had been Master Speria's earring. I'd been able to mess around with some goods in the mana tool shop, but I didn't know how any of them worked.
Most of the tools in the shop had looked like nuts, bolts, dice, and small tchotchkes. Then again, they were the scraps left in a shop on the brink of bankruptcy. It was unlikely that any of them were particularly cool.
Nevertheless, for a merchant on the verge of poverty, Mr. Chotos kept a deluxe bath. I was in the lap of luxury. For tonight, I could forgive him for being himself.
"Phew…" I sank into the water down to my shoulders and gazed up at the bathroom ceiling. Dense steam obscured the wood. *So warm…* In addition, it was wonderfully fragrant. Mysterious leaves floated on the water's surface, and they smelled kind of like jasmine.
I was dying of pent-up anxiety from all the things Gol had done to the punks. However, every last ounce of that fatigue melted away in the heavenly water.
"Hmm…now that I can see them, my legs have grown quite sturdy…"
Observing my legs through the water, I noted that the muscles had grown larger and more defined. Of course, I'd done nothing but trudge through an uninhabited wasteland for the past week or so. Anyone who did that much healthy exercise was bound to gain some muscle.
"Ha!" I struck a kicking pose, arching my toned leg out of the bathtub. "Behold, my beautiful calf!"
Suddenly, a loud crash came from the bathroom entrance. What was that? There wasn't supposed to be anyone in the changing room on the other side of this door.
Wait. Had Gol snuck in? I had asked her to wait in the small hallway out front.
"Gol, what are you doing?" I called out, but there was no response. Nothing but the plip-plop ripple of water. After several seconds of more nothingness, the door creaked and gradually opened. Through the crack in the doorway, a pair of familiar white ears fluttered. My eyes continued down to the slender, trembling body of an elf.
"Ah, so it is you. Just as I thought."

However, Gol wouldn’t face me. I could only see her back. She was halfway between the changing room and bathroom, but her face remained hidden behind the door as if she were embarrassed. Her lovely white bottom swayed anxiously. Frankly speaking, this was quite suspicious behavior.
“Hey, Gol. I’ve told you over and over that you can’t follow me to the toilet or into the bath.”
Her white butt tilted as she cocked her hip. Was she really reflecting on her actions…?
“There’s no need for you to stick with me around the clock. Feel free to do whatever you want inside the house. If you’d like, why don’t you go play with Teru in the living room?”
As I suggested these wholesome free-time activities, Gol’s hip movements, which had been fervent, became despondent and weak.
“Eh? Do you not want to?”
Gol’s butt swayed faintly. Was this an affirmation? I guess Gol didn’t want to go to the living room.
“I see… Then, sorry to ask, but do you think you can wait a bit in the hallway?”
Gol’s lower half continued to sway reluctantly before it retreated back through the door, which then closed.
Once I was sure my partner had left, I once again sank into the bathtub. Alone, I turned my eyes back up to the wooden ceiling.
“Gol and I just had an entirely butt-based conversation…” It seemed the accuracy of our nonverbal communication had improved, at least since our early days.
But why had my partner hidden in the changing room in the first place? Was she being a dutiful bodyguard? Well, it was true that bathrooms were a place where we as a species were the least alert. Historically, plenty of warriors and military personnel were assassinated while bathing. No matter your mastery of martial arts, a bath is a narrow space with few points of egress. Furthermore, you’re stripped down to your birthday suit with no weapons or other defenses at your disposal. Presently, I was also in this defenseless state.
Furthermore, in the past, bathing had taken place outside. I was sure anyone would die if they were attacked while naked outdoors. I definitely would.
I couldn’t be more grateful to my partner for being so vigilant with my safety. I really did need to show Gol my gratitude. Time to get up and go. My ever considerate partner was surely waiting patiently for me.
As I crossed the wet tile floor toward the changing room, I noticed a small, unfamiliar bottle on the shelf next to the soap.
“What’s this?” I picked it up. It was made from something like colored glass, and when I shook it, liquid sloshed inside. I opened the cap and sniffed the contents. “It smells like sandalwood…”

It had a sweet, refreshing perfume. Was it a kind of lotion? I poured the contents over my body.
“Wha—?! It’s all slimy!”
The mysterious liquid had an unexpectedly high viscosity and felt like slime on my skin, so I reflexively let out a strange voice. When I did, a loud crash came from inside the changing room.
“Eh?”
I turned in the direction of the sound. When I opened the door a little, a long, white ear popped out from the opening. My lotion-covered shoulders sagged.
“What now, Gol? Are you still hiding…?”

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After my bath, I entered the bedroom Mr. Chotos had prepared for me on the second floor. A lovely scent drifted from my warm body. I’d had to bathe again to rid myself of that strange liquid.
I was delighted at the prospect of finally sleeping on a bed again. For such an occasion, I decided to wear that pair of lame pajamas I had brought with me from my original world.
“When was the last time I wore these guys? Back in the basin?”
As I slid my arms through the sleeves, I pondered again why I had bought them. They were so lame that I compulsively questioned their existence. On a blue background, yellow cats…no, they were raccoons, right? Anyway, the faces of these mysterious animals printed in a repeating pattern were a really strange focal point for a design. You could even say there should be some kind of law against full-grown gentlemen wearing them in public spaces. Disturbance of the peace, for instance.
Fortunately, only Gol and I were in the room. This was a private space for family. No matter what outfit I wore, there was no one to complain. And anyway, Gol liked my pajamas.
“Now then. It’s nice to have changed into my sleepwear, but it’s too early for bed.”
To kill time, I nosed around the room. This was my first time staying in a place still inhabited by people in this new world. I had so many questions. My scholarly curiosity about this world’s culture burned as I began my investigation.
Mr. Chotos’s house resembled many of the wooden structures I had seen thus far. Its interior wasn’t much different from that of Luvel Zairein’s hideout.
Was it possible there were mana tools in this room as well? Now that I thought back on it, some pieces of furniture in Zairein’s hideout had appeared to be mana tools. However, I hadn’t known of the existence of mana tools at that time, so I had just ignored them for being unfamiliar.
“Ah, right. Speaking of unfamiliar furniture…”

One item in this bedroom particularly interested me: the strange device illuminating the interior. It was placed in a corner of the room and looked like some kind of white stone. Was this a mana tool?
In terms of size, it was roughly that of a desk lamp, and it gave off a pale white light. I suspected this was the same type of lighting used inside the cave behind the Grand Stone Gate, where I had discovered Zairein's skeleton. Its light quality felt slightly different from that of fluorescent or LED lights.
Exactly what principle made them shine?
I hadn't been in the mood to ask Mr. Chotos about them, so instead I had indirectly interrogated Teru earlier, to which she had said: "When Papa touches it, it lights up, and when you leave it alone, it turns off."
As expected of Teru. So clever and precocious—far more so than I. But alas, I was a narrowminded and incompetent adult, so I couldn't fully understand this keen girl's explanation…
Furthermore, because Teru had been so excited by her guests, she had tired herself out and was too exhausted to answer any more questions. It would have been beyond the pale for a gentleman to push a conversation past the point of his partner's stamina. Therefore, I began my own scientific examination.
"Shall we take a look?" I moved to the wall and fiddled with the lighting device. When I touched it, it really did feel like some kind of stone. But truthfully, I couldn't tell much from touch alone. Perhaps if I knew how much it weighed? However, when I tried to check its weight, I realized it was fixed to its base. I couldn't lift it. Could I remove it? No, if I dismantled it without permission, Mr. Chotos would totally crawl up my butt about it.
I was left rubbing my hands over the device, hoping to glean answers.
Suddenly, I felt someone lightly tugging on my pajama sleeve. So very modest. So very timid. I knew this feeling. This was my partner's way of asking for attention.
"What's up? Do you want to play? Do you think you can wait a bit? I'm right in the middle of a scientific investigation of this world's lighting apparatus…" I said as I reluctantly turned.
Gol clung to a corner of my sleeve with her right hand as her shoulders shifted restlessly. In her left hand, she held a moist piece of cloth.
"Ah, you want me to wipe your body? That was supposed to be a daily thing, wasn't it? And here I haven't done it at all recently. All right."
I would go all out on wiping her down tonight! Come to think of it, this was the first time I'd wiped her since she turned into an elven Greek statue.
Eh…? First time? My hand froze. This was the *first* time…? When I realized this fact, I was beyond astonished.
Why had I been so neglectful? Why had I waited until today to finally perform Goltarou's—now Gol's—favorite daily activity?
I supposed that since we lost a portion of our luggage in the fight against the ancient Earth Dragon, the water supply we received from Master Speria

had been limited. I hadn’t been able to waste our water. Even the spare piece of cloth I used to wipe down Gol had been blown away by that dinosaur. Those were all valid problems, and given them, I wasn’t in the wrong.
However, what about the days before that event?
On the evening of the day Gol changed into a beautiful elf goddess, we met Master Speria. During the several days the three of us traveled together, Master Speria’s Water attribute skills had meant I hadn’t needed to worry about wasting water, nor had I lacked any relevant pieces of cloth. At that time, I had even had Gol’s special cloth safely tucked away in my possession.
Yet despite all that, I had never wiped down Gol’s body, not once. Why, exactly…?
I already knew the answer. Ah, I couldn’t… I couldn’t lie to myself any longer: I was ashamed of being seen polishing this beautiful feminine figure in front of a cultured stranger like Master Speria! What if he’d taken me for a pervert?!
I knew this was the truth from the bottom of my heart. Even though I swore that I would forever treasure Gol no matter what form she took, I…I—I had discriminated against her based on her appearance.
I shuddered. I felt the ground underneath my feet crumble. What an abominable, twisted wretch I was. Even though this girl loved nothing more than having her body wiped, even though she never asked for anything else and she looked forward to it every day, for the sake of my worthless pride, I had neglected my gentle partner.
I was sure I had hurt Gol. In the first place, my partner had only transformed into a bishoujo figurine out of consideration for me, although that had been based on a misunderstanding.
I was the worst. I couldn’t even call myself civilized. No, I wasn’t even human.
“Gol, I’m sorry… I’m truly sorry. I’ll properly polish your body every day from now on. No matter what happens. No matter who we’re with. Even if there are people watching! Forgive me. Please forgive your stupid partner…”
While still in my lame pajamas, I embraced her. I lowered my head and begged for forgiveness, and the kind Gol softly and tenderly embraced me, too. She stroked my back like she was handling a fragile treasure. This only made my heart constrict further.
Several minutes later, I had already switched gears. Quickly switching gears was a wonderful quality of mine. “Then I guess I’ll start cleaning my amazing partner. I’ll make sure to wipe you down thoroughly for all those missed opportunities.”
Although, presently, there weren’t any dirty spots on Gol’s body. In fact, she didn’t get dirty at all. Well, mostly.

Gol would, on occasion, deploy grotesquely brutal methods to kill monkeys. As such, naturally, large splotches of blood would splatter her limbs. However, she would cleanly flick off the blood after a fight, just like a samurai flicking the blood from their blade. Even when I checked her limbs afterward, no blood or dirt ever remained.

Notably, that time she was knocked down and immobilized in our battle with the ancient Earth Dragon, I had noticed dirt sticking strangely to her body. But once she recovered, she went right back to being pristine.

In that sense, I didn't need to *clean* her. I was convinced her body was made of a relatively dirt-proof material. There might even have been some sort of invisible power deflecting all filth. However, as long as Gol wanted to be scrubbed, scrub her I would.

"The important thing is showing my gratitude to my partner for her care!"

I continued to speculate as I poked Gol's cheek with my finger. When I touched her like that, I didn't feel any repelling force. Instead, the material of her body moved under the pressure of my finger's movements, and it felt similar to human skin.

Had the surface of her body been like this before? The first day I touched Gol's body, it had been rough, but at some point a while later, she had become smooth. By the time we left the basin, she was faintly soft. When she offered to block the wind for me back when we were camping outside, she had felt like silicon. Now, as I squished her cheeks, they were even more pliable.

I recalled a similar chain of evolution. Gol had gone to great pains figuring out the perfect way to cut the glorious cranberry-apple. At first, I found her cuts were a little too refined, and I couldn't bear to eat them. Over time, she meticulously developed her technique by closely observing my reactions during meals, and eventually the cuts gradually, gradually…

It was like…yes, like she was circling closer and closer, little by little, until her prey was trapped with no chance of escape.

At that moment, the light flickered and its intensity softened.

Teru had said: "When you leave it alone, it turns off." Was this dimming a warning for its automatic shut-down? If so, we probably didn't have much time before the light went out entirely. I needed to hurry up and wipe Gol before it was dark. I once again turned to where she sat next to me on the bed, obedient as ever.

Her appearance now was dramatically different from the time she had spent as Goltarou, but her bodily structure remained largely intact. I could wipe her down just like I used to, then. I would start by having Gol bend over and raise both her arms, then make my way down from her face.

"Gol, could you stand and—"

Before I could finish, Gol flopped down on the bed. She lay face-up as she stared at me, utterly still. Her white body, illuminated by the pale bedroom light, was bewitching.

Hmph, what should I do about this? Well, to be honest, it probably *was* easier to wipe her down while she was on the bed. I could just flip her over when I needed to reach her back. “All right, then. Stay still, now.”

I carefully began wiping Gol’s face with the cloth. Her crimson eyes shone like a fire glowed within them. For some reason, the emotions churning behind her eyes felt stronger than usual.

When I diligently wiped her ears, Gol stirred and her ears twitched. That weak gesture belied the growing intensity of the glow in her eyes, which remained fixed on me.

When I tenderly wiped her neck, Gol twisted her body a little.

Yup, I bet it feels good. Dogs love neck skritches, too.

I swept down from her neck and moved to her collarbone. As I did, my hand brushed the thin garment on Gol’s shoulders. The silken stone garment slipped.

“Wh-what…?” My eyes widened.

Gol’s white shoulder now lay exposed, leaving her shoulder in a strange state of half-undress. What in the world? She could take off her clothes?

“What does this mean? How exactly could this…?”

This was extremely dangerous knowledge. My scholarly curiosity about golems once again flared.

I had one prior experience in investigating golems for the sake of research. At that time, I had grown distracted while fiddling with a headless golem in a shrine as I sought to understand the fundamental structure of these Greek statues. In case it isn’t obvious, I was *not* being a pervert or a bishoujo figurine fanatic. I was performing a serious academic examination for the sake of deepening my knowledge.

That shrine golem had worn a robe similar to the one now slipping down Gol’s shoulder.

Of course, that headless golem had been broken and the hardness of its stony surface fixed, quite unlike Gol’s current state. However, even putting aside the brokenness quotient, the nature of the headless golem’s clothes had clearly differed from Gol’s.

While it had at first seemed that the shrine golems wore clothes, those robes were in fact more like carvings. Apart from the fluttering hems, their robes and bodies were practically one and the same. They were less “clothes” than they were “designs.”

But here, just now, Gol’s robe had slipped. That meant *it* was more like actual clothing. No, but…that would still be strange.

Before this moment, I hadn’t realized Gol’s clothes were clothes-as-such. I was with Gol all the time, but I’d never touched her body before. Well, never on purpose. She stuck so close to me all the time—whether in battle or just in our daily lives—that I couldn’t help touching her quite a bit, perhaps even too much. And I could always see her, often from quite close-up.

Gol sometimes exposed her thighs in one of her flashy kicks. She really did move so differently from those stiff shrine golems. And if I were to lift the loose skirt flowing around her hips, I had no doubt now that it would behave like normal cloth. In other words, I could flip Gol's skirt.
Of course, I had yet to try this.
Even so, despite the malleability of this "clothing," it was all still part of Gol's actual body. On that point, she was the same as the shrine golems. There was no way her robe was a piece of clothing that could be removed. There was no way that I, her owner, wouldn't have realized such a thing.
In that case, what was going on? Had this girl changed the structure of her body's surface in such a profound way?
Wait a minute, did this mean Gol wasn't an upgraded version of a shrine golem but was, in fact, a completely different type?!
No, wait, could she actually remove her clothes?! Was this robe clothing or not?! Could it be detached from the rest of her body?!
Ah, no good. I really want to know!
My curiosity burned like a raging fire. Knowing me and big red buttons, there would be no stopping me now.
I impulsively flipped up the thin skirt covering Gol's lower half, exposing her white thighs.
Gol's body jerked.
That didn't matter to me now. I'd seen Gol's thighs countless times in the heat of battle, but what lay past the skirt was unknown territory. What would happen if I kept going?
Unable to help myself, I continued to make my way up her body, pulling aside the clothing blocking my path.
Gol stirred.
What? This girl's got a belly button?!
How did a golem get a belly button? Did it even have a purpose? I pressed my finger in a circle across the smooth skin around it. Hm, it felt like a normal belly button. It didn't seem to have any built-in special function.
Wait. Maybe if I stick my finger inside, I'll get it.
"Here I go…" I lightly inserted my finger into Gol's belly button.
Gol's body arched on the bed.
"Whoa! Y-you all right, Gol?" I was shocked for a moment, but when I checked on Gol, she slowly laid back down as if nothing had happened.
"Huh? You good? O-okay… Let's keep going, then."
I moved my finger back and forth inside Gol's belly button. Maybe it was my imagination, but every time I moved my finger, Gol's temperature rose just a touch. However, that reaction did nothing to rein in my curiosity.
My gaze slid down Gol's abdomen, at which point I noticed something strange. "Is that…?"
I had been so preoccupied that I'd completely overlooked it. Gol appeared to be wearing something akin to underwear. It was pure white, so it looked like the elegant silk underwear that high-class ladies wear.

Or, well, to be precise, the amount of cloth was slightly, uh, lacking. It was most akin to a lady's "special" underwear.
Suddenly, I had a new thought: Was this "underwear" also removable?
Augh, no good! Once my curiosity is piqued, there's no stopping it!
"All right, let's check it out." I extended my hand toward Gol's abdomen—and stopped at the last moment. I had a sudden intense premonition that removing this "clothing" from the rest of Gol's body would be an act that could never be undone.
However, my desire to learn knew no bounds. I extended my finger toward her crotch.
The tension between us reached toward climax. A mysterious aura Gol had silently emitted this whole time flared, and she gave off a heat so intense that I started to sweat.
"Hey, Gol, you're really hot." As I wiped the sweat off my forehead, I looked up from between Gol's thighs.
I could no longer deny that the way she was heating up was unnatural. Gol usually had perfect control over her body temperature. Was there something wrong?
I postponed my investigation to express my discomfort to my partner. As I lifted my gaze from Gol's lower half to her face, I finally noticed the greatest abnormality.
"Eh…?"
Gol's eyes were dyed a cloudy pink. Her irises were usually red, but now they were as pale as sakura petals. Was she malfunctioning? All the blood drained from my face.
"Hey, Gol! You all right?" I jumped up in a panic and shook Gol's shoulders. Her body limp, she looked at me in a weakened daze, her suspiciously pink eyes glazed and her body pulsing warmth. There could be no doubt; she was definitely malfunctioning.
I was racked by a horrible regret. I had ignored so many signs! First the terrible spasms, and now her wildly fluctuating body temperature. Furthermore, in the latter half of my investigation, it had been clear Gol was acting strangely. She reacted violently to my slightest movement, sometimes even thrashing. It was as if she were trying to endure a truly awful sensation.
Had Gol been feeling poorly the whole time? When had it all gone wrong…? There could be only one conclusion.
"Right. An *extension* of her body…"
Gol's skirt looked like a piece of clothing, but it was in fact an extension of Gol's body. Perhaps it functioned as a sort of external cooling device! And here I had forcibly removed it, and worse, I had stuck my face between her body and that vital component.
In so doing, had I compromised her ability to properly handle excess heat?! Had she desperately trembled and clung to my pajama sleeve all because she had to withstand the suffering caused by the removal of her extension?!

“How could this be? How could I have done such a thing…?”
This whole time, my partner had suffered in silence. I hadn’t even bothered to think. I was so caught up in my pursuit of knowledge that I blithely continued my investigation!
I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, Gol! Forgive me. I promise I won’t forcibly remove your extension ever again.
“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Gol. I should’ve noticed sooner…” I apologized over and over again, fervently nursing Gol. As I wiped her flushed face with a wet cloth, the light in the room suddenly disappeared. The time limit on the lighting device was up.
In the darkness, I tightly grasped Gol’s hand and shook with regret. If Gol didn’t recover, what would I do?
I didn’t care what other people said. The first thing the next morning, I would have Mr. Chotos introduce me to a good golem doctor. I didn’t care how much it would cost me. I had to fix her.
Feeling brave and determined in the face of tragedy, I held Gol’s hand. But my exhaustion had reached its peak, and I grew drowsy. Gol and I had done quite a lot that day, and after taking that bath, putting on my pajamas, and spending all this time on a warm bed…
Soon, I lost consciousness.

***

Before I realized it, the morning sun climbed up into the sky. I opened my eyes to pale sunlight filtering through the curtains.
Two bright, crimson eyes entered my view.
Whoa, your face is close! Ah, it’s just Gol…
My thoughts rapidly revived and I jumped up from the bed.
“Gol! Are you all right?” I grabbed her shoulders, but she looked puzzled. Her eyes were no longer a cloudy pink. “Th-thank goodness…”
I was relieved from the bottom of my heart. From what I could tell, she was her normal self, just like one of the shrine golems. It was as if everything that had happened the night before was a dream.
Then I noticed I was holding something in my left hand—a dry piece of cloth. It was what I had used to tend to Gol before I fell asleep.
So it wasn’t a dream. My hand really had lightly brushed the robe-extension covering Gol’s shoulder, and the cloth had slid over her skin, exposing that seductive white stretch of…stone?
As I moved Gol’s robe-extension back to its proper place on her shoulder, I let out a deep sigh. Apparently that horrible misjudgment of mine hadn’t been a dream after all.
I dropped my shoulders, depressed, and Gol leaned against my back; it felt almost like a hug, and her body temperature was slightly higher than normal.
The distance between us was closing.

Chapter 8:
Breakfast and Gol Army

"HEH. This is quite delicious," I said. I was crunching on a perfectly toasted round bun for breakfast.
"You can buy it at this one back-alley bakery. Many travelers completely pass it by, but everything they make is cheap and extraordinarily delicious," Mr. Chotos said.
"Hmph." I dignified him with an offhanded response as I dipped my spoon into the warm soup.
The breakfast menu at Mr. Chotos's house was impressively balanced. Lined up on the dining table before me were smoked meat, fried till crispy; scrambled eggs; warm bread; brightly colored bean soup; a salad of fresh vegetables; and goat's milk.
In fact, this was quite the civilized spread. He really put thought into proper nutrition. Also, little details like the salad being a mixture of unrecognizable vegetables and the mysterious yellow beans in the soup once more brought home that this was another world.
Mr. Chotos and his daughter sat opposite Gol and me. This gang of an old man, a young girl, a beautiful elf goddess statue, and some guy from another world crowded around a living room table made for a truly bizarre tableau.
I had to admit Mr. Chotos was good at cooking. But, well, that was a given. After his wife died, he'd had to raise his daughter as a single parent. Moreover, he was so deeply in debt that punks were hassling him at his shop. He surely didn't have the means to hire a housekeeper.
As I frowned at his bald head, I couldn't help thinking about how his wife had died despite his desperate ploy to get medicine that ultimately did nothing for her…and about how he'd had no time to mourn her, because he'd needed to care for his sickly daughter while paying back that massive debt.
That kind of stress and trauma would make anyone go bald. I definitely would have.
Mr. Chotos had matured, gone bald, and improved his cooking. He'd had no choice. But he probably still worked hard to do it.
……
Well, even if that was true, I still wouldn't forgive him for his awful money-grubbing tricks, never, not for the rest of my life!
Incidentally, as I partook of this breakfast, I wore those lame pajamas. Why the heck was I wearing them in front of other people, you ask? Well, because I forgot I had changed into my sleepwear when I made my way to the living room. I was utterly relaxed, as if I were in my own home.

When Mr. Chotos saw these pajamas, he looked at me with an expression full of endless questions.
Bastard, what's with that face? You got a problem with my slick duds? Well, this is my formal wear!
In any case, it seemed my pajamas were considered tacky by this world's standards as well. The lameness of these pajamas transcended dimensions. But I didn't mind. After all, the only people who could see me were Gol, an old man, and a young girl. No need for concern.
Notably, Teru loved my pajamas. Just as expected of a reasonable lady. She saw the cat(?) print and gleefully shouted, "It's Thunder Grizzly!"
If the young lady said so, then no matter what anyone else said, the true identity of the strange animal on my pajamas was forevermore "Thunder Grizzly."
"Hey, mister," I said to Mr. Chotos as I chewed my toast.
"Hm?" he answered around a piece of smoked meat.
"Um, is there a library around here?"
"What? Is there a book you want to read?"
"Yeah, kind of. I was thinking about looking up more stuff about golems."
"Oho, an earnest student, I see." Mr. Chotos frowned with the following apology. "Unfortunately, Tibar is a rest stop that just so happened to grow into a town. There's nothing as extravagant as a library in these parts."
"Oh, is that so? That's too bad."
My question had been loaded with an implied sub-question, i.e., "Do you people even have the concept of libraries?" Based on Mr. Chotos's reply, I could be confident that although this town didn't have one, libraries did indeed exist.
I had expected as much. There had been plenty of printed books in Zairein's hideout, so I assumed this world was advanced enough to make ample use of the printing press. As to why I needed books? Obvious! Studying. I knew practically nothing about golems, to the point that messing around with Gol had ended in a tragic malfunction. I needed to read and study in order to circumvent another such inadvertent disaster.
Thus far, the precariousness of my situation had meant I had thought only of survival and monkeys. However, now I had returned to civilization and could go back to thinking like a human. I was no longer among the monkeys; I needed to understand how to live among people. Ergo, I needed books, and plenty of them.
As I moved on to the salad, Mr. Chotos said, "Still, a library, huh? I don't think you're going to find an institution with a collection advanced and technical enough to interest a golem wielder at your level out here in Sadie territory."
"Huh?"
Oh no, Mr. Chotos, you misunderstand—I wouldn't be able to read such difficult spellcasting material. For, uh, religious reasons.

If possible, I wanted a nice, tame book for young boys like *Let's Move, Automobiles!*, but for golems. Yeah, you know, *Let's Move, Golems!*
I had suspected this already, but…was this man overestimating my abilities?
Hey, mister, to tell you the truth, your Teru over there—yeah, her, the giggling one with a mess of scrambled eggs and red sauce around her mouth—is far more well-informed than I.
I had taken to likening the body of knowledge I had about this world to that possessed by a child in elementary school. But…but! My run-in with the lighting device had proved I lacked even the level of knowledge commonly available to Teru, who was five years old. In other words, based on this new information, I revised my self-assessment: I was more ignorant than a kindergartener.
At any rate, I needed to express that I was, in truth, an incompetent moocher. If I didn't, our discussion was bound to go nowhere. "It doesn't have to be technical, per se," I said. "I just want something to read."
"Eh? Well, whatever. If that's all you're looking for, we've got a bookstore."
"Oh, really? I'll go there, then."
Forget libraries, I was all about bookstores now! For the time being, I would rely on one of those to teach me the golem fundamentals.
Although, one day, if possible, I would indeed need to visit a library or something like it for those technical academic books. I still needed to research Luvel Zairein's summoning spell. I hoped that studying the spell that had brought me to this world might help me determine a means of returning to my old one. Also, it would be great if I could cure my amnesia. On the other hand, my present lack of memory and the matter of my return weren't precisely straightforward problems.
Regarding my amnesia, I was presently able to enjoy my life with Gol in part because I lacked any memories of my loved ones back "home"; in other words, I had no attachments. However, if I were to recall those memories without knowing how to return to my loved ones, I might be racked with the despair of homesickness. I was sure I would miss those people more than I was prepared to.
As for my return, if I *did* discover how to get home, I absolutely could not go home alone. I *needed* to bring Gol back with me.
Of course! There's no way I could leave my adorable, precious Gol alone in such a perilous Jurassic World.
I despised the sort of inhuman trash who acquired pets on a whim and just as frivolously abandoned them at animal shelters. I would never do such a thing, even if my own life were at stake. I would take care of Gol until the very end. That was why, at the very least, I needed to find a method of return that would take both of us. I refused to settle for anything less.
Also, if we *could* return to my original world, I needed to make sure I got my memory back before we left. I mean, right? There was no telling what kind of problems would arise if I were unable to recall the names and faces of those I knew, let alone my own name. I wouldn't even know if I had family.

So even if I did manage to return to my original world, without my memories, I would be utterly socially inept.
Argh! What a complicated mess of a situation! To begin with, the one person who likely knew the most about my memory loss and a possible method of return—that idiot Zairein—had already killed himself! I couldn't believe I'd been so carelessly dumped here on hard mode. He was definitely messing with me. I really, really wanted to beat the crap out of that bastard Zairein.
Anyway, given all this, I thought it best to temporarily deprioritize searching for a method of return. There was, after all, one more important thing I needed to investigate: the Sorcerer King of Destruction. It was a rather important topic, as it pertained to my safety. I ran a constant risk of being wrongfully arrested. I hoped to mitigate the danger by acquiring more base knowledge on the topic.
Also, I had a vague, pressing sense that there would be consequences if I failed to learn more about my position in this world. Truthfully, that had been on my mind this whole time. I had avoided the dreadful *Soul Transcription* and finally reached a human settlement…but was this truly the end of the matter of the Sorcerer King of Destruction? Having circumvented the proper birth of the Sorcerer King of Destruction, had I truly brought peace to this world? Were my troubles over?
Somehow, I got the feeling that wasn't the case. I also had the sense that I wasn't working with the whole picture. I couldn't stop thinking about that black demon creature that had been waiting to ambush me the moment I left the basin. That thing had clearly been different from anything else I had since run into.
In terms of power, the ancient Earth Dragon had no doubt been far stronger than the demon. After all, Goltarou had caught the demon off guard and obliterated it with a deadly first strike, so in the end, nothing actually came of that confrontation. Compared to the events that followed, that initial encounter had been nothing.
But that was only because I had been with Gol. So my actual adventure should've definitely ended at that moment, right?
At the time, because I had been so dazed by the abnormality of the situation, I hadn't really processed what it said. But…hadn't it known I was the Sorcerer King? We had only just met, yet it had sounded so convinced. What exactly did this mean? I wasn't sure if the answer to these questions lay in books. But at the very least, it couldn't hurt to pore through some arcane library for relevant information.
I also wasn't sure if it was a good idea to ask other people about this matter. I really should have asked Master Speria more about it when I had the chance, but I hadn't thought we would part ways so suddenly. After he said his goodbyes and gave me his shoulder bag, there were roughly ten minutes before he actually left. It really happened in the blink of an eye. Of course, I could have pulled myself together and asked *something*.

The smoked meat on my plate had chilled. Caught in the whirlwind of thoughts, my hand had stopped moving in the middle of my meal. Master Speria had occasionally succumbed to this exact disorder when we journeyed together. But in my case, I appeared to be able to return to reality quickly enough.
Beside me, Gol worriedly peered into my face as I sat frozen with the piece of toast in my hand. Her face was quite close. Ah, my eccentric behavior had yet again caused my kind partner unnecessary concern. “Sorry, I was thinking about some stuff. I’m fine.”
Even Mr. Chotos looked worried about me.
Hey, I don’t need your concern. I’m not asking you to do anything. Wait… Perhaps this man knew something helpful? “Hey, Mister, do you know about the Sorcerer King of Destruction?”
“What? That’s out of the blue. Sorcerer King…of Destruction. You mean the one in folklore?” Mr. Chotos looked bewildered, but when he took in my serious expression, he mumbled, “Right, you’re a bit young. You must not know the tale. It used to be something only old folks talked about.”
Hey, mister, you’re pretty damn old yourself. Think you can pass as young with that ragged face? Whatever! “What did they say?” I asked.
“I believe they said that the Sorcerer King of Destruction was…yes, a man from another world. As his name implied, he had the same unusual ability as a mana beast. Or something like that.”
“I knew that already. It really is a straightforward name.”
“Hmm. Well, even though he’s called the Sorcerer King in a number of tales, I heard that he had other titles as well.”
“Other titles?”
“Yeah, how can I put it? Something like Poison King, or King of Bizarre Eating.”
“What the heck? What worthless names… Why call him that?”
“Who knows? I don’t know that much myself.”
“Jeez, mister. You’re absolutely useless.”
“Shut up. I’ll have you know I’m quite knowledgeable.”
“Huh? You definitely don’t look it.”
Mr. Chotos snorted with a scowl.
Hey, what’s with that face? If a middle-aged man like you pouts like a little girl, it isn’t remotely cute.
“Well, whatever. But about the Sorcerer King… You know, in the stories, he’s supposed to destroy the world, right? Do you know exactly how he does it?” I asked.
I was quite curious about this. To tell you the truth, I didn’t see how my powers had the ability to destroy the world. Even if I released all my power at once, I could only see it causing a small-scale natural disaster on a local level. Maybe I could crush a city or two, but this world was vast, and much larger than a mere city. It was, in other words, utterly impossible for me to destroy the world.

Furthermore, just like in that battle with the ancient Earth Dragon, if I were to do that, I would exhaust my mana in one strike and be left helpless. Besides, realistically, I was incapable of creating a true natural disaster. The best I could muster were incidental attacks with spears and stuff. A fundamental principle of spells in this world was that: “Even if you pour excess mana into the spell, its effect size will not increase.” As such, I had no way to destroy a large area all at once, even if I was the evil Sorcerer King.

Though perhaps there was another way for me to use my power to destroy the world. Hmm. Like if, perhaps, I were to create an army of Gols.

A hundred Gols…

“Ugh…”

Just thinking about it made me break out in a cold sweat. I suddenly felt that destroying humanity was all too possible.

No, no, no! I definitely can’t do that! And anyway, mass-producing Gol would be impossible. Creating even one nearly killed me. So wouldn’t the statistical lethality of creating two or three exceed 100 percent?

Besides, could I actually reproduce my results? I still felt like Gol had been a complete fluke.

Ugh…an army of cruel and beautiful Gols using their mysterious radar to capture escaping humans and beat them to death, turning the world into a sea of fire. I paled at the thought, but Mr. Chotos didn’t know what I saw in my mind and idly continued.

“I believe it’s said that when the Sorcerer King wins, he casts some kind of large-scale sorcery spell and annihilates all of humanity. That’s why each time the Sorcerer King of Destruction appears, humanity is destroyed, or something like that.”

“Eh?”

Why was he making it sound like the Sorcerer King inevitably triumphed and destroyed humanity? What did that even mean? Hadn’t Sorcerer Kings been defeated and killed numerous times in the past? Zairein had written something to that effect in that stone book, saying prior efforts had been killed before they could destroy jack squat. That was the whole reason Zairein had devised the second step in his summoning process—the one where he chose me based on my aggregate amount of mana and planned to overwrite my personality so he could produce history’s strongest Sorcerer King.

Also, hey, wait a minute… “If humanity was annihilated, how are you and Teru here right now?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a fairy tale to scare children, right?”

Ah, was he trying to avoid explaining? What a useless middle-aged man! Mr. Chotos looked stumped by my frustration. “Hey, Nemaki. Listen, you can’t go asking about the Sorcerer King in public, you know? I’m only talking about it because we’re inside. If the folks from the Church heard you, I doubt they’d be pleased.”

“Eh? Is this topic a religious taboo?”
“Kind of. Recently, the Church has been tightening their hold even out here.”
Ah, how dangerous. I’m glad I didn’t wander around town asking about the Sorcerer King.
At any rate, between this world’s religion that restricted free speech and my religion that restricted use of any element outside the Earth attribute…
What a strict thing religion could be.
“The world of man is defined by eternal suffering, huh?” I murmured.
“What are you talking about with that enlightened face…?”
I ignored Mr. Chotos’s exasperated expression, lamented the absurdity of the world, and let out a deep sigh.
That night, I had a dream where I became a first-rate golem breeder and raised an army of Gols on a farm. All the Gols were very fond of me, and they were kind and lovely children.
However, our peaceful days didn’t last long. A bloody feud broke out among them as they fought to determine the order in which I would wipe them down.
In the end, only the first Gol was left standing.

Chapter 9:
Coffee and Tending the Shop

CHOTOS'S MANA TOOL SHOP was, just as the name implied, the shop where Mr. Chotos sold mana tools. Two days after the large-scale dispute that unfolded on that very spot between Gol and the debt collectors, business resumed. Even so, there hadn't been a single customer.

As usual, there was a certain lack of goods within the shop, but the interior did feel a bit different. For one, a pale young girl, a white Greek statue of a beautiful elf goddess, and a man wearing an olive-brown robe hung around a large table inside. Of course, their true identities were Teru, Gol, and me.

Teru and I ate baked snacks while Gol sat quietly beside me. The snacks were like sweet cookies with a light, crunchy texture, and they tasted faintly of milk. How delicious. It was quite a popular snack in these parts, and it was sold at a neighborhood stand.

As I chewed, I turned to find Mr. Chotos standing behind me. "Hey, mister, even though you have no customers or employees, you've still got chairs and tables prepared. It really lets you relax."

"Well, before business turned bad, I had plenty of regulars—customers, guards, and so forth. I tell you, this place was bustling."

"Eh, are you serious? It doesn't look like that to me."

Mr. Chotos pouted grumpily.

Like I said, what's with that face? Even if a middle-aged man could pout, absolutely no one would be asking for it.

The pouting old man planned to leave the shop this afternoon. He got really into putting his outfit together that morning, so I admit he looked a little neater than usual. Well, no matter how he dressed up, there was honestly a lot of room for improvement.

He was putting so much effort into his appearance because apparently he had found a buyer for those sorcery cores. It was truly reason to celebrate.

There did seem to be a steady demand for sorcery cores. But what exactly did buyers do with those weird rocks? Make them into women's accessories?

"Hey… So, what exactly are sorcery cores used for?" I asked Mr. Chotos as I placed a handkerchief on Teru's lap. She was dropping cookie crumbs all over herself.

I didn't put much thought into the question, but Mr. Chotos's reaction was more astonished than I had expected. His mouth was fully agape, and at length he frowned at me, doubtful. "Huh…? What are they used for? Are you mocking me?"

"No, not at all. I really don't know."

"It's obvious. Golems! They're for golems! Of course, there are other uses, but a sorcery core's most valuable function is as the core of a golem." As

Mr. Chotos spoke, he looked over at Gol sitting next to me. “I mean, you have a sorcery core inserted in your Goretaru’s chest, right?”
“Wh-what…? Is that so? I really had no idea.”
Had I put such a thing inside Gol? I had absolutely no memory of such.
“Wait. You’re a spellcaster, yet you didn’t know something this basic?” he asked. Seeing my eyes widen at this revelation, Mr. Chotos’s eyes also widened at me. Suddenly, he looked like he understood what was going on.
“Ahh. Could it be you inherited the right to control Goretaru? So you didn’t create it after all. You really are a fortunate young master born to a good family. Hm, but then again, it’s strange to see how well you control it while knowing so little…”
Mr. Chotos took a hard look at my face, as if he were gazing at a pitiful person. Eventually, he put on a pained, sympathetic smile as he plopped a hand on my shoulder. “Nemaki, I thought you were only ignorant about market prices and lacked street smarts because you were an aristocrat raised in a foreign country, but…you’re actually more *that* kind of man than you look.”
“Hey, what do you mean by *‘that’*?!”
You bastard, if you’ve got something to say, say it to my face!
In any case, sorcery cores were used for golems, huh? Could it be this was the secret to creating a golem that wouldn’t crumble like the ones I used for training?
But no matter how I tried to recall, I couldn’t remember inserting such a thing into Gol. In the first place, I had picked up my first sorcery core long after I created her. In fact, Gol had been there with me to help me pick it up.
Could it be I hadn’t been paying attention during her creation and had mistakenly mixed a sorcery core into her raw materials? I tilted my head, puzzled.
Mr. Chotos gave me a concerned side-eye and began to explain as if he were lecturing a small child. “Listen, Nemaki. Golems use the sorcery core inside their chest to move the mana inside their base body like blood. This is what we call ‘mana circulation.’”
“Mana circulation…” I sat up in my seat and obediently listened to the lecture. He’s already realized I’m totally ignorant, so I might as well make use of this. This is only a fleeting embarrassment.
“Simply put, mana circulation operates on the same principle mana beasts use to control their mana flow via their sorcery core. As a creation of an Earth spell, a golem’s base should crumble into particulate matter upon the cessation of the spell; it only doesn’t because the circulating mana strengthens the spell binding the particles.”
“Huh, so that’s the mechanism…”
That had to be the reason the monkeys could wear stone armor, too. Their stones were just like a golem’s base.

“Mana circulation has a secondary advantage in that it prevents foreign mana from interfering with a golem. This is more technical stuff, so I’m not too versed in it… But as I understand it, the flow of circulating mana repels and disperses external spells, rendering foreign spells to their original particulate.”
“Ah, I know that! I learned it in Master Speria’s class.”
“Master Speria?”
“Ah, my bad. Just talking to myself.”
Anyway, as I listened to Mr. Chotos’s explanation, it became clear Master Speria had used extremely simple language in his explanation for his beginner pupil.
Could it be that from the start my teacher had already figured out I was below kindergarten level…? I rested my elbow on the table and thought about that for a while. Gol sat beside me and kindly observed my pensive state. She never did seem to get bored of watching me.
At this time, Mr. Chotos walked to the back of the shop. He returned carrying a tray of drinks, and a cup of steaming coffee was placed before me. “How about a cup?”
“Oh, thanks.” How tasteful for this man. Since I’d been eating sweet cookies with a young girl, I was craving a bitter drink.
Teru, meanwhile, got a cup of warm milk. Smart thinking, mister. I totally understand your concern about the effects of caffeine on a youth of her age.
Even though Teru was five years old, she was small enough to look three. I also wanted her to drink plenty of milk to grow big and strong.
As I mulled over this child’s future, I tried the coffee. However, halfway to my lips, my hand stopped. Was this strange drink from another world really *coffee*? What I actually held was a ceramic cup of unknown, steaming black liquid. Appearance-wise, it was completely coffee. However…
Although I remained vigilant, I sniffed it and cautiously took a sip.
“Oh…?”
Ah, now that was just fine. It really was like coffee, although its taste was slightly different. It was somewhat rustic compared to the drink I knew from my original world, but if I thought of it as this world’s *version* of coffee, it just worked. Not bad at all.
I drank more of this world’s coffee with a cheerful smile.
On the other side of the table, Mr. Chotos relaxed with his own cup. Then he opened his mouth suddenly as if he had just remembered something.
“Ah, right, right. Another interesting thing about sorcery cores. They allow golems to have an ‘artificial personality’ of sorts.”
“Artificial personality?”
“In layman’s terms, the sorcery core functions as the golem’s brain.”
Ah, so it was like artificial intelligence in computers, right? Since this world didn’t seem to have any sophisticated electronic machines, maybe similar effects could be reproduced with spells. Perhaps I could liken the difference

between my beginner golems and Gol to the difference between a toy with voice recognition and a super high-tech android.
“I see. That’s why she’s so much cleverer than a training golem…” I muttered. But had I *really* put such a core in Gol? Hmm…
“Yup, you’ve got it,” Mr. Chotos said and gave an exaggerated nod to my muttering. “Also, a golem’s base can be repaired, but once damaged or destroyed, a sorcery core can’t be fixed. You must take good care of Goretaru’s sorcery core.”
“O-oh. I see… Thanks.”
Mr. Chotos looked slightly dissatisfied with my vague and hesitant response.
“Listen, Nemaki, a golem’s artificial personality is formed from their accumulation of individual memories and experiences. It’s completely unique. In short, you could say it’s almost like the golem’s heart as well.”
He tilted his chin to my side to bring my attention to Gol. She was presently occupied with delicately wiping cookie crumbs from my mouth with a handkerchief.
“Your Goretaru is incredibly clever even in this baseline autonomous state. I’m sure your ancestors put a great deal of time and care into it throughout the years.”
“I-I see.”
Is that so? Th-thank you, my ancestors… As I expressed my gratitude to some unknown ancestors, I frowned at Gol’s chest, where she supposedly contained a sorcery core.
Yeah, her chest is as elegant and graceful as usual. As I studied the refined twin hills of my partner, another thought occurred. Even though she was categorized as a shrine golem, for some reason, she lacked the bombastic bosom those other golems possessed. If she really wanted to manifest some eye candy for me, I would’ve preferred a magnificent bust over elf ears—
Ah! No, that’s wrong. I refuse to judge anyone by the size of their chest!
In any case, a lot of Mr. Chotos’s explanation made sense.
During the fight with the shrine golems, I had noticed that if a golem’s head was destroyed or they were decapitated, they ceased to function. At the same time, I had become suspicious that something like a fatal weak point was housed in their chests. Even though the shrine golems’ vulnerable heads had ultimately sealed their fates, they had left their skulls completely exposed. However, they all wore additional armor of a special stone material over their chests. Furthermore, even in the middle of combat, none of the busty golems ever aimed for *Gol’s* chest.
It was as if this chest avoidance was an unspoken rule of honorable combat. However, given the way Gol always killed monkeys, it seemed her default instinct was to crush heads. Ah, that might have been the prime motivating factor on her end…
I suddenly came up with a new theory. Maybe the voluptuous bodies of the shrine golems weren’t a matter of dubious creator taste, but a safety feature for the sorcery core inside their chests.

Huh, if so, that might also explain the long hair that trailed down the shrine golems' backs. That stony hairstyle protected the span of their necks to the weak point in their chests from surprise attacks.
"Golem design is surprisingly complex…"
However, if this was the case, was it accurate to call my modestly busted Gol a shrine golem? I wouldn't get scolded by the fans of true shrine golems, right?
Deep in thought, my eyes fixed on Gol's chest. When I finally raised my eyes, Gol returned my earnest gaze with a passionate stare. Her crimson eyes shone as if filled with joyful expectation, and her long ears fluttered. What was she so happy about…?
You know what? It didn't matter whether Gol had some accidental foreign element mixed inside of her. And it didn't matter if I had to face an army of shrine golem fanatics hurling abuse at me about the size of her chest. I'd risk my life to refute them. My partner, Gol, was the very best, and she could puff out her slim chest as proudly as she liked. No matter her measurements, she'd always be number one to me.
Having reached this magnificent conclusion, I returned to Mr. Chotos. "You know, mister, I think you're actually quite knowledgeable about golems."
In fact, I'd go so far as to say he had knowledge in abundance. At least, it easily exceeded the explanation written in my introductory book. Although Mr. Chotos wasn't on the level of that great scholar—the talented, cultured Master Speria—he did pretty well for an evil, powerless merchant.
"Well, I need to be able to handle sorcery cores in my line of work," Mr. Chotos replied as if he were speaking to a clueless toddler. "I at least have to know about those. It seems to me more like *you're* the one who should be embarrassed for being such an ignorant spellcaster."
"Wha…?"
Hey! Stop looking at me with those pitying eyes!

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Roughly thirty minutes later, Mr. Chotos went to meet the trader. He left Teru, Gol, and I to tend the shop.
It seemed to be the first time in a while that tiny, fragile Teru had been allowed to stay in the shop. Her father hated leaving her home alone all day, but the constant threat of those punks had meant he couldn't bring her with him anymore.
Though the shopfront now was warm and bright, it was empty as usual. Customers passed it by, but since traders might drop in, someone needed to be present to receive goods. Mr. Chotos had been troubled because he needed to leave to meet his contact, but I was free and nonchalantly suggested that I mind the shop for him.
I had actually planned on going to the bookstore, but I could go another time. I couldn't leave Teru and Gol alone while I went shopping by myself.

For the time being, I had decided to stay in Tibar until Mr. Chotos paid back his debt. I was in no rush to set off on another journey. If that man crawled his way out of debt only for the Company to send another pack of embezzling punks, my heart would break with pity. I at least needed to stick around long enough to make sure any such miscreants wrote a proper receipt.
……
N-no, that wasn't right. This was a matter of frugality; I was only doing this for the free room and board. There was absolutely, definitely no way in hell I was doing anything out of pity for that wretched old man. I really don't want you to misunderstand!

For a while now, Teru had been sitting on my lap and drawing a picture. She giggled as she colored in a yellow lemon. Ah, so this world has lemons as well.
"This is, um…it's Mr. Nemaki's Thunder Grizzly!"
"Heh, it looks just like it. You're a great artist."
So this ovoid yellow shape was a Thunder Grizzly, the strange animal on my pajamas. Of course, I had known this from the beginning.
"And this one here. It's a Flame Bicorn. And here's a flower."
"They're really cute. You really are good at drawing."
Of course, as I was such an uneducated rube, I had no idea what these red and black squiggles were meant to resemble. However, you must praise a child to promote their growth. That's very important.
Delighted by my compliments, Teru hugged me, rocking back and forth. I was about to hug her back when Gol's white hands abruptly encircled the innocent girl. Gol snatched Teru from my lap and hoisted her up.
"Eh?" I blinked in surprise as Gol made Teru sit on her own lap and roughly mussed Teru's hair. "Ah, what…? You wanted to hold Teru, huh? Okay. Just don't surprise me like that."
My partner really did like children. Teru squealed happily at Gol's gentle roughhousing. It was a truly charming scene.
"You'll definitely make a good mother, Gol—whoa, close much?!"
Gol leaned in so near she could surely smell every note of my breath as she continued to skillfully pat Teru. What exactly was she trying to tell me…?
Teru obediently continued drawing from her new position on Gol's lap. Meanwhile, I rested my elbow on the table and let out a yawn. Because of Gol's maternal instincts, I no longer had to watch the child, but at the same time, I now had no work to do.
"I'm afraid I'm diagnosing myself with a severe case of boredom…"
Even the traders who were supposed to show up hadn't popped in. We hadn't seen a single customer, either. However, I think the lack of the latter couldn't be helped. Mr. Chotos's shop had a perfectly decent reputation, but currently, there were hardly any goods. You could see the empty shelves

from the street. The only customers who would enter such a dismal shop would have to be…
“A clueless person from another world, huh?”
Well, to be fair, if anyone actually did show up, there’d be no end to the customer service issues, given that the staff consisted of a golem, a young girl, and a Sorcerer King who lacked the common sense of a kindergartener.
Let’s pray we don’t see a single customer until the proprietor comes back.
“Oof.” I leisurely stood from the chair and made my way to the shelves, where I picked up one of the many brown dice that remained unsold. This dull cube was most likely a mana tool. Of all the slim pickings left of the merchandise, there were actually a fair amount of these.
“Hey, Teru?” I turned and called out.
“Yes?”
“Do you happen to know how to use these mana tools?” I asked. *When in doubt, ask Little Girl-senpai.*
Teru leapt out of Gol’s lap and waved her hand as she ran over to me. “Pick me! Pick me! I know! Um, um, this goes like this!”
She grabbed a round, white mana tool from the shelf and clutched it in her small hand. “Like this and go ‘Ah!’”
When she did that, the mana tool in her hand dimly lit up.
Ah, amazing as ever, senpai! But your explanation was a bit unclear!
However, I did notice small flashing particles converging inside the mana tool. Those shining motes were most likely Lightning particles. This unique phenomenon—where particles containing the power of attributes danced through the air—occurred whenever spells were cast in this world.
“Could it be…you imbue mana into the tool just like when you cast a spell?”
I knew how to do that! I could even be called adept. I had needed to keep my mana flowing for quite a while to create golems. Even my simple *Earth Spear*’s surface-to-air missile attack required a constant flow of mana to maintain its shape and prevent dissolution. I had to concentrate, but as long as I could imagine the flow, it wasn’t difficult.
As such, I focused my mind and imbued the brown die with my mana. As I did, a puff of Earth particles gathered within the brown mana tool.
Then, for some reason, I had an extremely *bad* feeling.
Images of my previous failures popped up in the back of my mind, one after another: the Grand Stone Gate in the basin that burst into a repulsive black lily; the Mentos Geyser explosion that shattered the binding on the stone book; and the environmental disaster of a pebble that destroyed the garden by Zairein’s hideout.
Ah, this was bad. I was doing something bad.
Seconds after my premonition, the die in my palm began to swell like a puffed mochi.
“Th-this is—”
Suddenly, the swelling die burst with an explosive bang! Brown shards shot through the air and Earth particles flew everywhere like brown fireworks.

Aauuugh! I did it agaaaiinnn!

Chapter 10:
Bills and Flames

"WHAT? When you imbued the mana tool with mana, it just blew up…? Are you an idiot?" Mr. Chotos looked at me with exasperation. "Ugh…"
This man really didn't pull his verbal punches. Yet I could say nothing in my defense. "Ack… I-I'm completely in the wrong. I'll pay for the broken mana tool."
"Nah, no need to pay for what wasn't selling. It's just…I've been in this business for a long time, and this is the first time I've heard of someone making a mana tool explode," Mr. Chotos continued with a puzzled look. "Surely it wasn't a defective product? I always inspect and test my goods, so I don't think I could have missed such a dramatic problem, but…"
It was a bit after the exploding-mana-tool terrorist attack, and I had meekly apologized to Mr. Chotos when
he came back to the shop—as was my responsibility, being the terrorist in question. The only witnesses had been Gol and Teru, so I could have spun some tale, but as a man of culture, my pride was on the line. I couldn't be a coward.
Anyway, aside from the obliteration of the mana tool, the shop was mostly undamaged. That probably had to do with the nature of the destruction, which had been something like a burst of internal pressure rather than detonation. Even the hand with which I had held the now ex-mana-tool was completely unscathed.
However, there had been *a* casualty. Immediately after the explosion, Gol worriedly stroked my hand, then abruptly attempted to smash the shop shelf on which the die had sat to smithereens. I was more flustered about that.
Please stop, Gol. If you break anything more, I'll go broke from all the compensation.
I had rushed to hold her back, but it had been right on the wire…
At any rate, the silver lining was that the shock of the explosion didn't make Teru cry. She merely blinked her little eyes in surprise before jumping around in excitement. Despite her frail appearance, Teru was a mentally sturdy child.
Hm? Wait a sec.
Returning to the topic at hand, given what Mr. Chotos had just said…was it so rare for a mana tool to explode that he questioned the quality of a good he normally wouldn't doubt? And here I'd thought the explosion was a normal consequence of an amateur's mishandling.
When I asked about it, Mr. Chotos frowned. "Look here… If there was any risk of it exploding just because you used it incorrectly, it couldn't be sold

as a common product, right?" Mr. Chotos pointed at the shelf of goods. "If you like, try any of the other tools. None of them will explode."
"Eh?" I hesitated. Frankly speaking, the exploding mana tool had been somewhat triggering. However, if I didn't work to overcome my developing trauma, I would be too scared to use mana tools for the rest of my life.
Did I have no other choice?
"You sure, mister? Are you really sure? Hey, you can't blame me for whatever happens next, okay? If it explodes, I'm definitely not paying you for it. And if you lose any more goods, you'll be careening toward poverty. You get that, right?"
"You're way too scared. Every tool on this shelf is safe enough for a child to handle. Here, I've got you, so hurry up and do it."
Mr. Chotos grabbed a round, white mana tool and placed it in my hand. It was the same white ball the renowned expert Little Girl-senpai had used to demonstrate the underlying principles of mana tools to her amateurish older friend.
"Argh, fine. I'll do it. I'll do it!" Newly resolved, I imbued the white ball in my hand with mana. Shining Lightning particles instantly gathered within it, and the white ball gave off a faint light.
Mr. Chotos said, "See? It didn't explode, right?"
"Huh? It really didn't."
I could barely believe my ears, let alone my eyes—it didn't explode. It… didn't explode? It didn't explode?! It didn't explode! I did it! Behold, even I could use a mana tool! Amazing. It was glowing!
I cheered in sheer delight and excitedly imbued mana in the next products on the shelf, one after the other. There was a baton-shaped mana tool that produced water, a bolt-shaped mana tool that froze water, a mana tool that produced a comfortable breeze like an electric fan, etc. I tried all of them. So convenient—mana tools were amazing. And in the end, none of them exploded.
"Hey! This is amazing, mister!"
"Jeez, Nemaki. You really are like a child…" Mr. Chotos was saying some nonsense words. I didn't know what he was talking about.
Every one of the mana tools intrigued me, but I thought the stick-shaped mana tool that produced water was most convenient. It was on sale, too, so perhaps I could buy it later.
However, while none of the tools I tried exploded, I couldn't use every single one, either. For some, even if I imbued a ton of mana into them, they remained inert.
"Hey, Mister, this emerald trumpet-looking thing doesn't do anything."
"Hm? Ah, that's a special type. Unless you have a certain level of aptitude in the appropriate attribute, you won't be able to use it."
"What do you mean?"
"Hmm… Do you want me to explain this to you, too?"

And thus, I received a simple lecture from Mr. Chotos about mana tools. According to him, you could for the most part classify mana tools into three types.

The first type reproduced specific spells even if you lacked aptitude for the spell's attribute. That glowing white ball was one such example. Even someone like me, whose conversion rate for anything outside the Earth attribute was nil, could use the illumination of that tool's Lightning spell. However, this type of tool couldn't reproduce more complex spellcraft. At best, they could hold beginner- and elementary-level spells. I would say they were equivalent to home appliances.

The second type of mana tool strengthened and expanded on the power and range of specific spells, thereby providing support for complex spellcraft. The turquoise crystal earring Master Speria used to strengthen his Wind-attribute detection spell was of that second type. These tools were not for laymen, but for professional spellcasters. The strange emerald trumpet that didn't respond to me was one of this type. Apparently, it strengthened a Wind-attribute communication spell that transmitted the caster's voice across long distances, but you needed aptitude for the Wind attribute to use it—of which I had zilch.

The last type of mana tool was not represented in this shop. Mr. Chotos said these tools allowed their users to employ unique spells that they wouldn't normally be able to use. These spells could be completely different from the ones more common mana tools produced. Furthermore, many tools of this type could no longer be manufactured, as the secrets of their creation had been lost. As such, I'd never see one in a small, family-run store like Chotos's Mana Tool Shop.

The formal term for this third type of mana tool was "ancient mana tool," but because of their rarity—on top of their exorbitant price—they were irrelevant to my life. Thus, I didn't care much about them. Besides, I had nothing but bad memories of anything called some kind of "ancient."

As I recalled the infuriating black dragon that broke Gol's arm and made her cry, I blew into the emerald trumpet. Because it wasn't actually an instrument, it sounded like I was blowing air through a tube.

"By the way, mister," I said.

"Hm? What?"

I picked up a brown die from the shelf and held it up for Mr. Chotos to see. It was the only kind of mana tool that no one seemed to want to buy. "This cube is the same as the one that exploded before. What kind of tool is it?"

"Ah, right. That's, you know, the Earth spell that creates a simple outdoor privy. Since that spell requires the caster to continually supply mana while the privy is in use, it's an absolute pain, right? That mana tool helps manage the process. Though, well, as you can see, it's not very popular."

"Eh…?"

I knew that spell. It was the spell in the introductory book to create an outdoor toilet. I believed its formal name was *Create Privy*.

But you're joking, right? Is the spell that unpopular?
Create Privy erected four thin walls of dirt to conceal an outdoor toilet, which it also generated, and once one's business was complete, it collapsed and buried itself. It was a top-notch sanitary spell. A hygienic man such as myself considered it the strongest, most god-tier spell among Earth spells. Although, when I cast it, I hardly expended any meaningful amount of energy. But Mr. Chotos made that sound like a difficult task for ordinary casters. Even though it was a truly wonderful spell, it was treated as garbage… How depressing.
In my mind, I gently stroked the page on *Create Privy* in the now lost *Introduction to Spellcasting IV*.
It's fine. You don't have to worry about what others say. I understand how good and precious you are.
I had read *Introduction to Spellcrafting IV* in the basin after I was summoned. I thought back on my lost days with my gentle lady-teacher (I hoped), the author Emerly Heilem.
What about the co-author Luvel Zairein, you ask? Well, I've never heard of that jerk before.
Unthinking, I casually imbued the die in my hand with mana. Faintly glowing Earth particles slowly gathered around this fabulous tool…
Could you believe it once again swelled like a mochi and burst into pieces? The shards scattered through the shop like miniature fireworks, round two.
"Why? Why did it…?" I stood still in the middle of the ruins of the mana tool, on the verge of tears. "Sorry. I'll pay for it…"
Gol tenderly stroked my hand as I stood there, grief-stricken. After ministering to my knuckles for some time, Gol drifted away, seemingly reassured I was uninjured. My partner was a good and gentle soul. From the bottom of my heart, I was grateful for her kindness.
That wasn't the end of it, however. Seconds later, Gol released a wave of violent bloodlust targeted at the dice on the shelf to my right.

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"Hmm…now that a second one has exploded, it's hard to say it was all coincidence." Mr. Chotos had been pondering next to me for some time. Meanwhile, I embraced Gol to keep her from destroying the entire shelf in a murderous frenzy. Fortunately, my instincts as her owner had alerted me to her intentions. My hug prevented her attempt to cause further property damage. She had squirmed in my arms at first, but she was now docile. I was a little concerned by how limp she had gone, as if she were exhausted.
"Hmm. I believe the cause of this strange defect is that your mana conversion rate for the Earth attribute is abnormally high," said Mr. Chotos.
"Eh? A high conversion rate causes explosions?"
"Ah, well, this is just a theory. Essentially, mana tools raise one's conversion rate in the tool's attribute. However, if I'm correct, the tool's multiplier

effect combined with your natural conversion rate surpassed the tool's mana capacity and it exploded. It makes sense in theory, but…" Mr. Chotos crossed his arms and grumbled. Eventually, he looked at me like I was some pitiful animal and shook his head. "Nemaki, your abilities are really skewed."
"Hey, Mister, I told you to stop looking at me so pityingly!"
"Ah, yes, yes, got it."
Mr. Chotos left me to my tantrum and began to clean the remains of the mana tool scattered on the floor. I would have normally offered to help, but I couldn't move since I was holding Gol. She cuddled up in my arms, rubbing her cheek against mine.
Given how docile she was like this, I wondered if I ought to start walking her around the town in this fashion. Back in my original world, I'd had to hold my dog whenever I took him to the vet so he wouldn't cause any trouble. When I held him, he would relax just like how Gol was doing now. Golems really were dogs.
As I leaned my cheek on Gol's head, I deliberated how to compensate Mr. Chotos for the succession of broken mana tools. He said I didn't need to pay, but it left a bad taste in my mouth to be indebted to a broke man. In short, it was a matter of pride.
"Ah, right…"
If he wouldn't let me compensate him per se, what if I bought some of his shoddy goods? I did kind of want the stick that shot water. I rummaged through my shoulder bag to grab my wallet. Then I noticed the bundle of bills inside the bag.
Right! I had forgotten to ask Mr. Chotos about the strange slips of paper with the words "Selvei Scrip" written on them.
"Hey, Mister, do you know anything about these?" I thought nothing of it as I slapped the bundle on the table. Next to this bundle, Teru was drawing a picture. A stack of money and a young girl—what a peaceful picture of everyday life.
However, when Mr. Chotos saw the stack, his expression abruptly changed. His next words were unusually sharp. "Nemaki, hurry and put those away. If you try to use that money here, you'll be punished."
Mr. Chotos frowned as he spoke, glancing behind himself to check if anyone else was inside the shop.
Relax. You've got no customers to speak of.
Still, being told I would be punished left me pretty near panicked, since I had the soul of a cultured man who always desired to operate within the bounds of the law.
"Is something wrong with this money?" I asked as I rushed to stow it away.
"Why do you even have those bills…? Well, whatever. Wait a sec." Mr. Chotos put away his cleaning tool and closed the shop. He even closed the front shutter doors, which doubled as turning off the lights. Finally, he grabbed a mana tool that looked like a red stick from the shelves.

“Did you really have to close the shop because of me? I don’t get it, but I’m sorry.”
“No one was coming in anyway. More importantly, Nemaki, lend me one of those scrips.”
I drew a bill from the bundle and handed it to Mr. Chotos, who held that red stick over the bill. Red particles like little flames gathered at the stick’s tip before a small flame flickered to life.
“Oh! That’s convenient.”
I was impressed until Mr. Chotos, of all things, set the bill on fire.
Are you stupid, Mister?! Has all the stress of your debt driven you insane?!
“H-hey! What the hell?”
“Don’t panic. Just look.”
“‘Don’t panic’?! What do you think you’re doing to my precious assets—huh?”
As I peered, I saw that the scrip wasn’t on fire. A pale green light surrounded the paper, and the fire was soon extinguished. Teru watched the green light with twinkling eyes. I understood her awe in my bones.
“So it really doesn’t burn… I see. This scrip is the real deal. The flame’s failure to catch confirms it.” Mr. Chotos returned the bill to me and placed the red mana tool back on the shelf. “That Selvei scrip is a special type of bill produced with an advanced spell. You can’t use it anywhere other than the Selvei territory in the Great Forest to the north.”
“Huh…?”
“Of course, this scrip can’t be traded at a currency exchange, either. So don’t be stupid and bring this over to one, got it? You’ll be asking for trouble. I know you’re like *that*, but I thought I’d at least warn you.”
Ah! You once again described me as “that.” You bastard. Are you seriously trying to pick a fight with me? Fine, I’ll take you up on it!
I was about to kick off an ultimate showdown with this man when I thought again.
Wait. Now that he mentions it, I did think about trying to exchange these bills for other currency, didn’t I? You’re pretty sharp, mister. Our battle will have to wait.
“Anyway, Nemaki. Where exactly did you get your hands on these Selvei scrips? You’re from the east, right?”
Even if you ask me, how would I know? I just randomly swiped them as a consolation prize from Zairein’s study. I rubbed my neck. “To tell you the truth, I never knew what they were. I just happened to come upon them on my journey.”
“Is that so…? Well, I won’t pry. Anyway, just because this scrip can’t be used anywhere outside of Selvei, don’t think of them as counterfeit or useless scraps of paper. If you do have the opportunity to go up north, or if you have connections there, you could very well find a use for them.”

What? Is that so? Because Mr. Chotos had gone all tense and dramatic, he had needlessly scared me. “Well, do you know how much these bills are worth?”

“Hmph, let me see… I don’t know the northern economy very well, so I can’t say. But I don’t think it’s some outrageous amount. At the very least, they’re not going to be worth more than an Earth Ogre sorcery core. So for you, it might not be worth it to make a trip all the way to snowy Selvei just to liquidate this cash.”

Mr. Chotos frowned at the bundle of bills, tilting his head in puzzlement. “From what I can tell, I think some scrips were taken out after they were bundled. Look, the string holding the bundle is a bit loose… Could this be the change leftover from a larger purchase?”

I also tilted my head. This Selvei scrip was a local currency. As such, it wasn’t strange to learn that its use was prohibited outside its territory. However, the presumably severe punishment that came with it was a bit much.

If I assumed the surrounding territories preferred to use gold and silver coins, then all the more universally useful money—gold and silver—would flow into the Selvei territory, be converted to scrips, and the money would… stop. It gave Selvei an overwhelming economic advantage. That would be bad. Hopefully, there were proper regulations in place.

Anyway, I was more interested in why Luvel Zairein had these northern-use-only bills while his summoning ritual was prepared in a deserted basin in the east.

I had read Zairein’s biography in his self-written books in his study. He was originally from the imperial capital, which was further west of Tibar. That biography never mentioned any connection to the north. Did this mean Zairein had obtained a large sum of local currency to buy something big in Selvei? Mr. Chotos’s earlier observation supported this.

As someone who intended to die and held no lingering regrets as he planned to end the world, what had Zairein wanted to buy in such a faraway place?

“You probably don’t know this,” said Mr. Chotos, “but Selvei is a recent addition to the empire as a result of the great Northern Expedition over thirty years ago. Their currency was different, and their laws were different, too. They even recognized the abominable custom of slave trading. Personally, I would never want anything to do with them, even if it was purely business-related.”

“Hmph, I feel the same. Trading in human beings? What an absurd place.”

As I spoke with Mr. Chotos, Gol stared at the Selvei scrips on the table. Usually, she never paid any attention when I talked to anyone else and only stared at my face. It was rare for her to look elsewhere. Also, she seemed a bit gloomy. Her long ears were tilted down.

Could it be that you hate these bills, Gol? I don't have any particular need for these strange scrips, so if they make you this sad, I'll burn them right away… Oh, right. They won't burn.
"Well, frankly speaking, I don't need these," I said. "Do you want them, mister?"
"I don't need them, either. Like I said, I don't have any business partners in the north. And since the shop's finally getting back on its feet thanks to you, I don't want such problematic things tied to my business."
"Argh, I can't burn them and I can't get rid of them! These Selvei scrips are practically industrial waste," I spat as I chucked the bills into my bag.
Mr. Chotos frowned. "In-dues-treel waist… Huh, what's that?"
"Ah, sorry. It's a phrase from my hometown. Um, it means something like useless trash you can't get rid of."
"Oho, this is the first I've heard of it. What a strange phrase."
As you may have just surmised, not only did my weird translation ability occasionally undergo gorillafication, there was this additional shortcoming I had just discovered, which functioned almost like a hole. In other words, vocabulary for concepts yet unknown to this world simply couldn't be translated.
Somewhere in the process, actual Japanese generated in my brain and tried to make its way out of my mouth. How frightening. If I didn't pay close attention, I might end up speaking Japanese in this place.
When I was with Master Speria, I had treated him as a respectable senior, so I had chosen my words with great care. Since I was so vigilant when speaking to the first living person I met in this world, I had managed to avoid using any words that could have revealed my translation shortcomings. Before that, Gol had been thoughtfully interested in everything I said, no matter what it was. Since I had never noticed this glitch before, it came as a bit of a shock when I first realized it.
Furthermore, since I spoke so casually with Mr. Chotos, and he met my retorts in kind, I was instantly aware of the misstep.
Incidentally, I think internet slang and game terms often slipped through my translation—take the "romance flag with a blossoming young lady" I went on about earlier. The word "flag" was outside the translation's ability to accurately grasp. I felt a great deal of spite about this.
I mean, it was true that "flag" was itself derived from computer jargon and thereby involved some complicated implications. Accurate translation might have been genuinely impossible.
But I was interested in the fact that while my internet slang largely went untranslated, computer terms often worked out just fine. Words like "software" and "programming" apparently had readily parsed equivalents in this world's language.
Given that, was it possible this world had computers, or perhaps spells that operated like them? It felt like a real possibility.

Lost in my thoughts, I stroked the unusually depressed Gol in my arms. As I pet her, she slowly returned to her energetic state. She buried her face in my chest and squirmed. Thank goodness.

At that moment, the bright afternoon sun flooded the interior of the shop. Mr. Chotos had reopened the shop's shutter doors.

"Ah, right! Nemaki, there was something I forgot to tell you." Mr. Chotos turned to me with a smile.

"Eh? What?"

"Ah, it's really nothing. It's just that I rushed back to the shop as fast as I could, but seeing you crying about destroying the mana tool surprised me and it slipped my mind. It turns out, with the profit I made from the sale of those sorcery cores, I can at last pay back my debt."

"Oh, really? So you did get it done."

Good for you, mister. But I-I wasn't crying or anything!

Although he so casually insulted me with an entirely false revisionist history, Mr. Chotos looked really excited as he spoke. At the same time, he seemed just a touch nervous. "That's why, in a few days, I plan on going to the branch office of the Paisley Company in the northern town of Zibil to repay the debt."

Chapter 11:
Underwear and Date

"GOOD MORNING... Wait, what are you doing, Gol?"

When I awoke the next morning, I found Gol with her face buried in my old underwear. I'd taken it off before I went to sleep, thinking about washing it in the morning, but now…

Gol continued to press her face against my underwear, making no other movements. She seemed to be in a kind of trance, though possibly that was just my imagination.

Oh, I understood now. My partner was giving my clothes a smell check to assess their filthiness…I think. She was determining whether they needed to be washed. In the few days we had lived in Zairein's hideout in the basin, Gol had often sniffed my underwear for that very reason. I knew she meant no harm, but I was embarrassed and wanted her to stop.

Can you please maybe not…? I had asked her to stop doing so numerous times, but then Gol would just sniff my underwear in secret.

As you can see, Gol had a sense of smell. Still, this olfactory sense wasn't particularly advanced. If I had to say, I'd guess it was slightly *less* acute than that of an average person's. You see, it always took her a bit of time to determine if something needed to be washed.

On the other hand, her auditory abilities were nigh peerless. At times, she reacted to even the smallest of sounds. In spite of that, she wouldn't listen to other people at all, except for me. It was a truly crippling case of selective hearing.

But the greatest among Gol's five senses had to be her sight. Her eyes were extraordinary, especially her kinetic vision, which far exceeded human capabilities. Paired with her mysterious radar, her superior vision allowed her to maintain constant total awareness of her surroundings.

During our conversation the previous night at dinner, Mr. Chotos had explained that a shrine golem's keen eyesight came from the crystallized "photoreceptors" in their eyes—i.e., the exquisite crimson gems acting as Gol's irises. Meanwhile, the busty shrine golems had green irises, the emeralds to Gol's rubies.

However, golems with photoreceptors were actually quite rare. Usually, golems relied on their "Detection Crest"—in other words, that strange pattern on their forehead—as an all-encompassing sensor of sorts. It perceived light, sound, and even smell, depending on the kind of golem, but none of its senses would be as keen as Gol's.

All in all, I could now see why golems ceased to function once their head was destroyed, since their ability to navigate the world depended entirely on that head.

Be that as it may, Gol usually left her Detection Crest covered by her bangs, as if she were embarrassed and didn't want me to see it. When her forehead was exposed, she would restlessly shake her head until her bangs hid it again. The only time Gol ever showed her forehead was when she was in a serious fight.

Now I was a bit concerned, though. Were my partner's sensors functioning properly? Gol fluttered her ears whenever she listened to me, which I had thought indicated eagerness, but…what if she was actually straining to hear? Even now she was desperately shoving her face deeper into my underwear, trying in vain to smell them.

"Hey, Gol," I called out. "I think that's enough for a smell test."

She didn't move, so I went to check on her and halted, shocked. Gol's eyes were once again turning that cloudy pink as her face remained lodged in my underwear.

"Oh no, she's breaking again." I snatched my underwear away from her. "Are you kidding me? Do my briefs really smell that bad…?"

I couldn't believe it. Had I secreted an odor strong enough to make Gol malfunction? I worriedly looked over the underwear in my hand.

They were an ordinary pair of boxer briefs. I had brought them with me to this world along with my pajamas. But unlike my pajamas, these weren't lame…or so I thought. I checked the smell myself and didn't find them particularly noxious. I wasn't deeply surprised; I had cleaned them just the day before.

Ah, but… They say you can't detect your own body odor.

Also, Gol was definitely on the verge of malfunctioning.

I see. So my underwear really does stink…

A dagger sank deep into my heart.

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“What? You want to buy underwear?” Mr. Chotos frowned at me. We were in the shop once more, though I had Gol sitting to rest from her earlier glitch.
I nodded, tears in my eyes. “Yes. Due to my circumstances, I, uh, don’t have a lot of underwear on me. Um…I’m just concerned about…stuff. Like smells and so forth…”
In fact, my greater supply of underwear had been blown away during the fight with the ancient Earth Dragon, so I currently only had two pairs: the ones I was wearing at the moment and the boxer briefs I had protected by storing them in my duffel bag along with my pajamas.
In any case, given the morning’s events, I’d be in trouble if I didn’t purchase new underwear as soon as possible. I’d been rotating between my two pairs, but if one day it rained and I wasn’t able to do laundry, I’d be doomed.
“Hmm. In that case, why don’t you visit the clothing shop in town? It should be open by now,” Mr. Chotos said. “You said you wanted to read some books, too, right? You should drop by the bookstore while you’re at it.”
“Right, I’ll do that…”
Clothing shop then bookstore, huh? This might be a good opportunity.
As I later learned, there were a few different types of underwear in this world. The basic and most common ones were shaped like trunks as opposed to, say, loincloths. They had no elastic, so waist size was adjusted with a drawstring. The fabric wasn’t particularly starchy, so I didn’t mind wearing them at all.
Before I left, I asked Mr. Chotos, “Come to think of it, how much do briefs cost?”
“You don’t even know the cost of underwear? You really are a sheltered kid, huh?”
Hey, Mister! You can take your pity and sit on it.
“Your economy is different from my hometown’s,” I said. “Listen! Don’t make that face! It’s just the economy. So how much for briefs?”
“Men’s underwear should be…hm. I believe you can get a decent pair for fifty copper coins.”
“Fifty coppers…”
Then that means, um… How much is that worth again?
The meals at the restaurant had been around ten copper coins…probably. My memory was vague, at best. Then underwear was five times more expensive than a restaurant meal? So clothing *was* more expensive in this world. Still, from what I’d seen of this world’s culture, I had feared the cost of clothing would make my eyeballs pop, and this wasn’t so bad.
“I see. I shouldn’t have any problems buying them at that price.”
“Hey, Nemaki.” For some reason, just as I grabbed my wallet and headed for the door, Mr. Chotos stopped me. His eyes were those of a guardian

watching his young child going on an errand for the first time. “I’ll be busy today with all the preparations for my journey to Zibil, so I can’t go with you. Will you really be fine by yourself?”
“What?! Condescending much? I can buy my own damn underwear, you know!”
Just as my tantrum and I threw open the door, Gol staggered up from her seat to join me.
Oh? Is she coming, too?
I had hoped she’d stay to rest and tend the shop, as she was still unsteady and looked like she was about to collapse at any moment. Oh jeez, was she okay?

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A smiling man in his thirties pointed to an old store at the end of the alley. “That bookstore has the best goods in all of Tibar.”
“Thank you very much. Sorry for having you lead me all the way here,” I earnestly expressed my gratitude, forever indebted to this man for politely offering to guide me here.
“Ah ha ha, don’t worry about it. I hope you find the book you’re looking for. Please enjoy yourself in Tibar, Mr. Golem Wielder.”
The man smiled and waved as he left. What a nice guy.
Gol and I headed down the street toward the bookstore. Today, my partner was walking a half-step behind me. Compared to our usual formation, she was closer than she’d ever been. It almost felt like she was walking right next to me. Unusual indeed.
We were carrying bags stuffed with briefs and other articles of clothing. For a guy less competent than a kindergartener, I’d managed shopping just fine. In fact, the briefs had been wonderfully cheap. I had been ready to spend those fifty coins, but they were actually being sold for twenty. Moreover, the owner of the clothing shop smiled as he handed me socks and a bunch of other freebies. Furthermore, he was the very man who had guided me to the bookstore.
“I’m really glad he was such a friendly person…”
Gol looked particularly elated to heft these bags of underwear. Her ears were continually fluttering. Maybe she just enjoyed shopping? When we were selecting my briefs, she was fairly picky. I thought they were all the same, but it seemed she had strong opinions—maybe even a fixation. Although, since I’d be the one wearing the briefs, I wasn’t sure why she cared so much.
The bookstore’s age was palpable. The building had to be quite old. It was slightly smaller than Chotos’s Mana Tool Shop, but then again, I thought that shop was needlessly large.
I opened the bookstore’s wooden door with a creak and stepped inside. As I did, I caught a whiff of ink: the signature smell of my beloved bookstores.

The interior was surprisingly clean and free of dust. Though the exterior showed its age, the interior was properly maintained.
Various books lined the bookshelves, ranging from encyclopedic collections to picture books to technical manuals. It was just like the clothing shop owner had said—this place definitely felt like it had a wonderful variety of goods. Although, as I expected, it was a bit less well-stocked than the bookstores I was used to.
I perused the fairy tale titles on the shelves. Big Cats in the Dark Forest. The Woodcutter and the Spellcaster. The Adventures of the Hero Tepaolé…
"Oh, there's the reference section."
Various reference books lined a shelf to my right. However, my beloved *Introduction to Spellcrafting*—my copy of which had been blown away by the ancient Earth Dragon—was unfortunately not in evidence.
"If only I could've bought a replacement." I picked up another reference book instead, but it was sealed in transparent film, so I couldn't actually read it. In fact, it seemed practically every book in the place was sealed in the same way.
I guess browsing culture isn't a thing in this world.
Because of my problematic translation ability with its unfortunate gorillafication glitch, purchasing a reference book without being able to confirm I could read it was risky.
"It sucks, but I guess I'll have to buy another one…" I forlornly returned the book to the shelf.
Further inside the store, I saw the old lady who seemed to be tending it. No matter where else I checked, the only person I could find was her. Alas, it didn't seem like I would get to encounter the proprietor's granddaughter and fall into sweet young love.
Of course, I knew that had never really been an option. I wasn't sad or anything. I'd come here with the sole purpose of buying books!
In any case, let's find a good book about golems or something.
I thought I might as well buy another book, too. Maybe a hobby book about something I personally might enjoy. I was a die-hard bookworm, after all.
After debating with myself, I settled on two books: *Illustrated Guide to Golems* and *Edible Wild Grass*.
Illustrated Guide to Golems was, as the title suggested, an illustrated guidebook about golems. I chose it because, according to the grandma in the store, its illustrations made it easy to understand.
The other, *Edible Wild Grass*, seemed useful in survival situations, and I was moreover interested in the flora of this world. A book most intriguing and beneficial.
It came out to one silver and ten copper coins for the book on golems and two silver for the one on grass. Books were rather expensive.
Then again, I received a considerable discount on both. The initial prices were six and eight silver coins respectively, effectively taking me from a total expenditure of fourteen to three silver coins. Talk about a bargain.

For some reason I couldn’t discern, the people of Tibar treated Gol and me with extreme favor. Just as with the clothing shop owner, everyone smiled and competed to give me directions, and if I debated over whether I should buy something, they lowered the price for me. The uncle at the food cart had even given me baked sweets for free. I’d decided to bring them to Teru as a present.

Everyone was so kind. I didn’t think they had been this friendly on my first day in the town… How peculiar.

This trend became especially obvious with the bookstore grandma. As she calculated my bill, she was overcome with emotion and gripped my hand tightly, tears in her eyes. Once this strange phenomenon reached the point of her weeping, it was beyond my comprehension. They say everyone is popular about three times in their life; perhaps my turn for popularity with old ladies had arrived.

In any case, because of this, I managed to finish my shopping with a heavy purse, even though I’d still bought plenty of stuff. Clothes inclusive, I had spent approximately twenty to twenty-one silver coins. As one silver coin could buy a night in a decent inn, I might accidentally have spent over twenty thousand yen.

I worried at this thought and checked the contents of my wallet: five gold coins and fourteen silver, and a too-annoying-to-count number of jingling coppers. Those last were all change from the silvers I’d spent.

I still had plenty of sorcery cores left, too, but since I had no way of exchanging them, I realized I should probably cut down on spending sprees for a bit.

All right, let’s work hard to start saving up tomorrow.

With that, Gol and I went our merry way back home, Gol holding her bag of briefs with great excitement.

In retrospect, I treated my gains and losses with terrifying complacency.

Chapter 12:
Wagon and Elderly Man

THE DAY AFTER I bought my briefs, the four of us headed to the city of Zibil so Mr. Chotos could repay his debt at a branch office of the Paisley Company.

This Paisley Company was a fairly large organization, and its main branch was located in another territory.

Zibil was north of Tibar and far larger, structurally speaking. As a person from another world with plenty of spare time to shop and go sightseeing, I decided to accompany Mr. Chotos. This spare time was my only reason for doing so. My goal was merely *sightseeing*. I was just extremely in the mood to go sightseeing!

It wasn't that I was racked with worry about an old man going by himself to meet a suspicious, evil company while carrying a large sum of money. It definitely wasn't that. I didn't care about him or anything. It's really important to me that you understand that.

In any case, Zibil was reasonably far away. Our round trip would take about two days, and we would spend a night in Zibil. As such, we obviously needed to bring Teru. Only a demon would leave a five-year-old child alone for two whole days.

"Ah, there's our ride!" Holding Teru's hand, Mr. Chotos pointed to a covered wagon in an alley.

"Huh. That wagon's rather nice for a guy like you, mister," I said.

This would be our mode of transportation. Mr. Chotos had been getting it together the day before. It was vital, as we would be traveling with Teru. Only a demon from the depths of hell would force a tiny, sickly, five-year-old child to walk a distance that would take a wagon a whole day to travel.

However, although we were going by wagon, it didn't really take a toll on Mr. Chotos's budget. It seemed we would be hitching a ride. From what I could tell, there was no one else around, either. We were the only hitchhikers.

In any case, as this would be my first ride in a vehicle in another world, I was thrilled. The wagon was drawn by two horses. Even though this was another world, horses were still horses. They weren't like that deer with its bizarre, twisted horns and odd half-moon eyes; they were extremely normal, simple horses with gentle eyes.

Structurally speaking, the wagon wasn't that different from the ones I knew of. Wait a minute… On closer inspection, it was slightly large for a two-horse-drawn wagon. Additionally, an unfamiliar, green, box-like apparatus was fixed underneath the carriage.

What exactly was that weird box? I was super interested. My curiosity began to tingle. This was a bad sign.

If I surrendered to my thirst for knowledge and started examining the wagon for scientific purposes, I might end up spending hours fiddling with it, thereby greatly delaying our departure. I didn't care much about causing Mr. Chotos trouble. That didn't matter. Rather, I didn't want to inconvenience the wagon driver's delivery schedule with a substantial delay.

I desperately suppressed my urge to pry, averting my gaze from the strange box. I turned my attention to the front of the wagon where the driver would sit and found an elderly man already positioned there. This grandpa was most likely the owner of the wagon.

Before boarding, I greeted him out of gratitude. Showing courtesy is the bare minimum requirement for a cultured man. "Thank you very much for taking us along with you. We'll be in your care today."

"Ah, no, no. It's me who's in your care." Because I had suddenly spoken to him, the elderly man looked a little taken aback. However, he soon laughed, showing the white teeth of his valiant, sunbaked face. "I'm also relieved to have the generous golem wielder of rumor as a bodyguard. After all, they're saying a mana beast has been leaving a disturbing trail of victims on this road."

What a tender gentleman. The rumors circulating the town were due to the illegal acts of violence Gol and I had committed against the debt collectors the other day. In order to protect ignorant little me from shame, this grandpa praised me and treated me with great kindness. He had earned a great number of my affection points.

After that, I moved to the back of the wagon. I'd thought about asking the grandpa if I could touch the horses before I boarded. Like with monkeys and deer, I appreciated them as noble and delicate creatures that had walked together with humanity throughout history. As such, I held great respect for the species. But in the end, I said and touched nothing. Immediately after I threw a passionate gaze at the horses, I sensed Gol beginning to emit an icy bloodlust toward them.

It had completely slipped my mind, but Gol's experience with animals consisted entirely of being bullied by wild monkeys and a dinosaur, so she was generally bad with them. These delicate, clever creatures sensed her homicidal intent and grew restless. The old driver had a hard time trying to calm the poor frightened things.

I'm truly sorry for all the inconvenience my partner's awkwardness has caused you.

"Oof." My shoulders drooped in disappointment as I climbed aboard.

The interior of the canopied wagon was fairly wide and there wasn't much cargo. Even if the four of us made ourselves at home, there would be plenty of room. A clean, thick, comfortable blanket was spread in the area where we would sit.

Yup, just as I suspected. The old driver was a most considerate gentleman.

“Hey, you’re dawdling, Nemaki. What were you doing?” Mr. Chotos was already sitting on the blanket with Teru next to him. She seemed eager to ride and bounced up and down in excitement like a small animal.
I plopped down and sat cross-legged in front of Mr. Chotos. “Nah, it’s just that I went to the front to greet the driver.”
“At times you’re strangely polite. Is that something you eastern aristocrats do?”
While we spoke, Gol quietly joined us, crossing her legs and sitting as if to snuggle me. As she did so, I suddenly worried whether Gol would exceed the wagon’s weight restrictions. How much *did* she weigh?
Honestly, I figured she weighed a considerable amount. At the very least, she went out of her way to seem light, and she evaded my attempts to determine her true weight with the most unorthodox maneuvers. I suspected she was in truth quite heavy, especially due to that moment when I had lifted a limp Gol in my arms after she was damaged by the ancient Earth Dragon’s miasma. She had been fairly hefty.
At the time, I’d thought she weighed the same as a thin girl of average height. Back in the day, I used to sidestep around my younger sister, who had roughly the same frame as Gol, and pick her up. However, I think my sister was a little lighter than Gol. Well, then again, my younger sister was also shorter than Gol, so—
Hm? *Younger sister*? I had a younger sister? Was this a fragment of my memories I had lost when I was summoned?
Ah, damn it! When I tried to remember, I got nothing but void. What the hell? *Explain yourself, Luvel Zairein!*
“Tsk,” I clicked my tongue.
Well, whatever. Returning to the issue of Gol’s weight, I estimated that she was weighty enough, but nothing outrageous. During our time in the shabby hideout in the basin, Goltarou hadn’t broken through the floor or anything. Even now, when Gol boarded the wagon, it didn’t seem to creak. That meant that Gol wasn’t as heavy as either a stone statue or her original material, the stone pillar, likely because I’d poured a ton of mana into my *Reduce Weight* spell when I created her.
Hmm. In the end, no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn’t get a good sense of her weight. Maybe I needed to try lifting her up?
While I pondered this, the wagon began to slowly make its way through the western gate and out of the city. I watched the town of Tibar recede from the back of the wagon. By the gate stood a bored gatekeeper who didn’t look that strong. Both he and the town gradually grew more distant, the image of unremarkable pastoral beauty.
Come to think of it, there was a tall watchtower on the eastern side of the town, but…
“There’s no watchtower on the west side, huh?” I murmured.
“Watchtower?” said Mr. Chotos. “Ah, you’re talking about the observation tower. It’s there to monitor the state of the miasma to the east. It’s covered

the neighboring wasteland, but hasn't yet reached us. The tower's really mostly there to reassure the folks."
"Ahh. I see. So that's how it is."
It wasn't for looking out for enemies, then. No wonder Gol and I weren't questioned when we came from the east. Tibar was a peaceful place, after all. When I'd heard the small nations to the east were constantly at war, I developed the impression that this world was ruled by strife, but that had since proven false.
The wagon continued in this tranquil manner until we arrived at a four-way intersection on the road. Here, the wagon turned right and headed north. At last, we had left the one-way road heading west.
The new road wasn't on the old map I had pulled out from Zairein's study. Perhaps it hadn't yet been constructed when the map was drawn. It was probably the reason Tibar bustled with so many travelers, despite being at the end of the east-west road due to the miasma. Tibar functioned as a rest stop for people traveling on the north-south road.
Geographically speaking, the capital was due west of Tibar, so I thought it likely that plenty of people who came to and from there passed through Tibar. Possibly, the people of Tibar now made their living by maintaining the north-south road due to the unfortunate eastern barricade. Their work was so admirable.
The sun shone sweet and calm, and surprisingly, the wagon didn't rock. We were going at quite the pace, but there were even fewer vibrations than I expected from a car. Where were the rustic rattles and shakes? Ah, was this the purpose of that strange apparatus underneath the wagon? I had seen the grandpa climb down from the driver's seat and do something to the green apparatus before we set off. Was that box a mana tool?
Augh, I'm getting interested again…
I thought about asking the renowned expert Mr. Chotos, but he was sleeping. I could just kick him awake, but Teru was borrowing her papa's lap as a pillow. If I woke him, I might also wake her in a tragic chain reaction.
Teru had been so excited to go with everyone that she hadn't slept much the night before. After staying up late, she got even more excited when we actually boarded the wagon. She was by now quite exhausted. I wasn't some demon from the very lowest depths of hell who would disturb a young child's rest.
In that case, I had to ask the old driver. But we were in the back of the wagon, so he was some distance away. I could have moved the cargo to create a gap through which to talk to him, but Gol would have definitely followed me. She handled things that weren't my possessions a bit haphazardly, and she might upend the carefully stacked cargo.
And before we even got that far, she would terrify the horses.
"That's no good, either. I guess I can't ask anyone…"

I gave up on solving the mystery of the wagon and resumed looking out at the scenery. Blue skies and green fields filled the back gap in the wagon's canopy. How beautiful. This was completely different from the auburn miasma-covered wasteland I had been traveling through up until this point. The fertile plain was blanketed in greenery. How did I know it was fertile? Because vast fields of wheat and other grains popped up along the road as we traveled. On occasion, I also caught sight of golems walking through the fields. They were farming golems, right? I couldn't clearly make out their details because of the distance, but they had the same mannequin shape Goltarou had initially assumed.

Another characteristic of this land was the plethora of sheep. I often saw herds of them from a distance. I didn't know their breed, but they looked normal enough as they ate grass. They certainly didn't have rock armor like those awful monkeys. When enough of them gathered together, they looked like a fluffy, white carpet laid upon the green field.

It was truly a peaceful scene.

Yet, somehow, the fertile fields felt unnatural, too. Maybe it was the other thing that had been bothering me for some time now.

"More ruins," I sighed. Every so often when we passed a cluster of houses, I also caught sight of some abandoned ones.

"Ah, it's because of the mana beasts," said Mr. Chotos. "Recently, a dangerous mana beast has been patrolling the area. A lot of people moved to the big cities because they're scared."

"Whoa! Mister, you were awake?" But this bothered me. A dangerous mana beast? "Could it be the monkeys?!"

Those damn monkeys! Had they come so far out here—without my permission—to harass the neighboring farmers? Unforgivable! Time for a spanking! As the monkeys' diligent trainer, I burned with a sense of failed responsibility, but Mr. Chotos was confused.

"M-monkeys?! What are you talking about? I haven't heard of any monkey-type mana beasts around here." He blinked for some time in surprise, but after a while, he cleared his throat with a slightly awkward face. "W-well, anyway. The mana beast that's been causing trouble is called a Flame Bicorn."

"Flame Bicorn?"

So not a monkey. Since it was a bicorn, that meant it was a relative of the one-horned unicorn, right? A horse-type mana beast, then. A fire-shooting, unicorn-looking, mystery animal from another world, huh?

"A Flame Bicorn is, you see, a large quadrupedal mana beast with big, fiendish, twisted horns and ominous, half-moon eyes. It's highly aggressive, so it'll encroach on human territory with no fear whatsoever."

Uhhhh, excuse the hell out of me, but isn't that an outrageously dangerous horse? Wait. I tilted my head. "Hm? Two twisted horns and half-moon eyes?"

Why do I feel like I've seen those features on something before…?

In any case, I definitely hadn't seen that horse-type mana beast before. My imagination was acting up.
"What's wrong, Nemaki?"
"Ah, no, it's nothing. Just thinking. Please continue."
Mr. Chotos nodded with a serious look. "Flame Bicorns are extremely dangerous. They can produce an incredibly hot flame between their two horns and shoot it at will, turning their surroundings into a sea of flames. We've only seen one on this road, but it's already taken a disastrous toll."
Wh-what's up with that horse? It's way too dangerous... I could no longer think of it as a mere "dangerous animal." If we encountered that monster, I was sure we'd be burned to death in a contained ecological disaster.
"On top of that, the Flame Bicorn moves quickly. Even when a party was formed to go confront it, they weren't able to capture it. By the time the party arrived, all that remained of the site where it had been spotted was scorched earth. They had to give up."
Excuse me, what? It's fast, too? That meant you couldn't run away if it tried to attack you. That was too scary. I hoped we didn't ever encounter it. "H-hey. I'm sure we won't, but what if we accidentally stumble upon it? Is it all right for us to be moving at such a relaxed speed? Shouldn't we pick up the pace...?"
I was terrified, my feet cold at the thought of a flamethrower-turned-horse. On the other end of the equation, Mr. Chotos, despite being himself, didn't seem the least bit scared. I didn't know whether to be infuriated or impressed!
"Well, it isn't the type of mana beast that appears near the road, so there's no need to worry on that count. Furthermore, for some reason I certainly can't explain, there haven't been any reported sightings of it the past few days. Almost as if it had died..." Mr. Chotos said with a smile. "In any case, it doesn't matter anymore. Even if we were to run into it, we've got your Goretaru to handle it for us. We're never safer than when we're with her."
"Hey, are you confusing my Gol for some kind of attack dog? I'm not letting her fight some crazy pyromaniac horse, you hear me?!"
"Huh? That's quite the cautious declaration for someone who instantly pummeled Dazu the Swordbreaker, Nemaki. With your abilities and a golem of that caliber, you could end a fight with any passing mana beast in a single blow."
"That's not the problem! What if Gol gets a burn or something from fighting that strange, flame-throwing, pervert horse?!"
"Huh?!"
While Mr. Chotos and I made a racket, Gol pushed her supple arm against mine. She rested her chin on my arm and rubbed her cheek on my shoulder.
Partner, sorry for interrupting you in the middle of enjoying your cheek-rubbing fest, but do you think you could throw one of your own complaints at this rude old man?

After that, we continued our journey with idle, noisy banter about trivial things. From this chat, I realized the people of this world had a loose interpretation of land ownership. They settled in empty lands, moved around, and lived freely. This was probably why their land looked so fertile. I worried that if Luvel Zairein had summoned an economically hungry capitalist instead of me, who lacked interest in all things related to profit, they would’ve devoured this world. It would have been just like when the kindhearted Native Americans were overtaken by white settlers.
Yeah, if that stupid Zairein had really wanted to destroy the world, he made a huge mistake in his candidate-selection process. I lacked both the educational foundation in economics and the backbone to create a hellish world of discrimination and concentrated wealth.

Chapter 13:
Guidebook and Inn

WE TOOK SEVERAL BREAKS for the horses to eat and rest as we continued northward. The green scenery from the back of the wagon continued to slowly flow by. Soon, it was midday.

By then, I was a bit bored, so I took out a book from my bag: the *Illustrated Guide to Golems*. The golems in the fields had reminded me I now owned this book. With so much free time in the wagon, why not spend some of it on reading? I also had *Edible Wild Grass*, but I wasn't in urgent need of any grass-gnawing. Golems were far more important.

"This book has quite handsome binding…" Had it really been all right for the bookstore grandma to give me such a discount? It hadn't clicked when I was paying, but if this was originally worth six silver coins and I paid only one and copper change, then it was the equivalent of having the price of a sixty-thousand-yen book dropped to ten thousand. I had done something outrageous.

"Oh? Is that the book you bought yesterday?" Mr. Chotos asked.

"Yes. It's on golems. Listen, I got this for about one silver coin, but…could that possibly have turned a profit?"

"What? One silver coin?! That's unheard of. An academic book like that should be far more expensive. If that's all you paid, that store's definitely in the red."

"Ugh, I thought so. I have grievously wronged the bookstore grandma." Had she accidentally given me the wrong price? Although I hadn't realized it at the time, I might have acted as a swindler who took advantage of the elderly. For a man who took pride in his cultured nature, this was an unforgivable act. I was drowning in the seas of my guilty conscience.

But Mr. Chotos seemed to be thinking something different. He was smiling. "Ah, I see. You bought that book from Old Dancy's shop, huh? No wonder she gave you such a good price. You should be grateful and accept it."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Her grandson was seriously injured by Dazu's group last month. Luckily, they left him his life, but it was a terrible thing. Seeing as you beat Dazu so thoroughly, she must've wanted to express her gratitude."

So that was what was going on. Even though I had been given a rare gift, everything still came back to that illegal act of violence against the punk gang. I felt a little ashamed. But if this gift had brightened the grandma's mood, I supposed everything was okay.

However, given this new knowledge, I now understood the debt collectors had been misbehaving all over Tibar. This Paisley Company had hired those guys to do those things, which in turn made them responsible for more brutality than I had already imagined.

Frankly, I was getting nervous. Why did Mr. Chotos have to go and borrow from that company, of all places? There was a limit to mere stupidity.
Or should I say, mister, I don't know how exactly you're misunderstanding this, but the one who tossed out that big muscle-meatball wasn't me, it was Gol.
"Looks like you helped out the bookstore grandma…" I said as I rubbed Gol's head. "Good for you, Gol."
Gol was delighted, but slightly confused at the same time. I suspected she didn't know the reason for the rubs. Her flustered movements just gave me that impression.
Again? When are you going to start listening to other people?
"In any case, if that's what happened, I shall indulge in the grandma's kindness and gratefully read this book." I sprawled on the soft blanket spread out for us and flipped open the cover.
This *Illustrated Guide to Golems*, if I were to compare it to something from my original world, felt like an illustrated textbook for junior high to high school students. I didn't really know how widely books were distributed in this world, but there appeared to be some degree of difficulty involved in reading this one.
It might be out of this less-informed-than-a-kindergartener's league, but that can't be helped. Let's work hard to understand it.
Fortunately, when I flipped through the pages, my translation ability didn't corrupt any words. The descriptions were probably about the illustrations, so I didn't think there would be any references to spells that weren't in the book, for which I was relieved.
I flipped back to the beginning, but this time, I took my time going through it. I had plenty to spare.
Mmhm, mmhm, very interesting… I see. It seems there are two classes of golems: light and heavy.
Heavy-class golems ranged from three to six meters tall, like tank-level huge. Most were for military use, but a portion did engineering work.
Meanwhile, over 90 percent of the golems in this world were light-class. From what I'd seen, Gol was most likely a light-class golem.
Were the "light" and "heavy" classes determined by weight? Or were they based on height, or even horsepower?
"Hey, mister, about the class distinction for golems, on what basis—"
I raised my head to ask a question, but it seemed Mr. Chotos was snoring sloppily on the blanket. Teru was also snoring, though much more cutely. Their stomachs had just been filled with lunch.
"These two sure do sleep a bunch…" They didn't resemble each other at all, yet you if you studied their habits, their blood relation was clear.
The only ones left awake in the lightly swaying wagon were me and Gol. I sprawled out on the blanket reading the book, and Gol laid beside me so we could look at the book together.
"Are you interested in the illustrated guide, too?"

Gol drew her face closer and looked very satisfied, her cheek rubbing against my shoulder.
“You really do like rubbing your cheek against my shoulder, huh? Are you thinking this should be some kind of new trend?”
Gol looked at me with her pleased, sparkling crimson eyes. She was in a wonderful mood. In that case, I wanted her to do whatever she wanted and enjoy this pleasant journey. I let my partner do all the rubbing she desired while I dropped my gaze back to the illustrated guide.
Um, where was I again…? Ah, that’s right. The part describing the class distinction between golems.
According to the guidebook, light- and heavy-class golems were further divided into subcategories. In other words, my Gol was known as a “shrine golem” while the ones I saw in the fields were “farming golems,” and there were plenty of others.
Ultimately, I believed the difference between light- and heavy-class golems could be likened to the difference between small- and large-breed dogs. For example, a shrine golem would be a Shiba Inu, while a farming golem would be a Golden Retriever.
This dog analogy really is great for golems.
In any case, the different kinds of golems made them seem like all sorts of fun. Gol had fought with the other golems in the shrine, but I hoped that one day she could make friends with the other children.
“Still, this book is much simpler to read than I anticipated…” Each description of a golem was accompanied by a simple illustration. It really was easy to parse. Just as expected of a book recommended by the gracious bookstore grandma. The next time I met another golem, I might even be able to distinguish its type.
The next page I turned to had an illustration of the most common type of heavy-class golem employed by the military: a shield golem. Thick, sturdy armor covered their faces, and they were practically invincible when assembled in formation. They were amazing.
The illustration depicted a tough golem with T-shaped face armor and L-shaped arm armor. If any single word could describe this guy’s appearance, it would definitely be “shield.” That armor was probably made of the same special stone the shrine golems’ breastplates had been crafted from, since they had a similar thickness. The shrine golems’ breastplates were slightly thicker, though.
On the following page was the “crossbow golem.” The illustration showed a bulky golem with a large ballista in place of their right arm. The description said they were capable of long-distance attacks with their ballista, which also made them a unique type of heavy-class golem. The power behind their massive stone arrows could easily pierce a castle wall. How terrifying.
But while this crossbow golem had destructive power, it had a short range and an accuracy problem. As such, they couldn’t be used in a castle siege or as crowd control unless multiple golems were lined up for a barrage.

Well, if they had range, people could have asked them to exterminate those monkeys from afar. Just went to show the world didn't always work out so tidily.
"There also seem to be quite a lot of heavy-class types like the 'hammer golem' and 'war-elephant golem'… I guess most of the golems of this class really are used by the military."
On the other hand, there was quite a diversity of uses for light-class golems. They served in manufacturing and care, though they could also be used for combat. The type Gol was often presumed to be, the "shrine golem," had several pages dedicated to it.
It appeared that shrine golems were considered a special type. They originally weren't seen much in public, since their main purpose was to protect religious institutions. Even their creation process was kept secret by these religious groups. But since they were uniformly beautiful and graceful, they had many imitations, though the materials used for these mimics' differed from the ones employed by the churches and generally had lower performance capabilities.
Additionally, shrine golems were considered a type of "ancient golem." These ancient types were based on golems excavated from old ruins, so a subset of their functions had yet to be discovered.
Huh, so are they like some kind of OOPArts? Well, at the very least those ladies' breasts were out of place, in a way.
I continued to leisurely page through the guidebook as the wagon rocked.
"This book is so interesting that I just can't stop."
There were so, so many different golems. It was almost like a fashion magazine… No, if I had to be precise, it felt closer to reading an automobile catalog.
Ah, this "crying golem" was truly interesting. It appeared to be a golem used by an ethnic minority somewhere to hunt, but they also produced extremely terrifying sounds from their mouths. When hunting, they would use their voice to corner prey…almost like a hunting dog.
Okay, I was convinced. Golems really were dogs.
"Oh? What's this golem? It looks cool."
I had found an illustration of a golem that looked like the gallant, strong, armored knight I had first imagined and failed to create. It was another kind of ancient golem. The illustrated guide called it an "armored demon gol—"
Bleurgh.
"Urgh…"
I suddenly felt sick and I fell on the book. Yeah, so… It was totally my bad reading a book for a long time inside a rocking vehicle, and I was now completely wagon-sick.

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"Hey, Nemaki, we'll be arriving soon."

“Ugghh…”
I rose to Mr. Chotos’s dulcet tones: the worst kind of awakening.
I felt thoroughly horrible on account of the motion sickness and nausea. In this weakened state, Gol had desperately nursed me, and I had ended up falling asleep on her lap. Presently, Teru was also sleeping on Mr. Chotos’s lap.
Gol’s definitely treating me the same way that man treats his daughter. Hmph, guess that’s to be expected for a Sorcerer King more lowly than a kindergartener…
My heart was soaked by my tears of despair, but I forced myself up and looked out at the scene in front of the wagon beyond the driver’s seat.
“Ooh…”
The city of Zibil spread out just beyond the field. It really was fairly large. Its skyline was similar to Tibar’s, but the gray walls encompassing its entirety gave a grander impression. Size-wise, it was also multiple levels above Tibar, with plenty of two-story buildings.
But that stone wall was particularly splendid. Tibar’s earthen walls were so weak that they would have been instantly penetrated by a few of those monkeys’ killer rugby balls. However, two or three layers of this city’s thick stone walls just might have withstood a monkey attack.
I paled at that thought. “H-how could this be? When did I start using monkeys as a measure of defensive capability…?”
I was deeply troubled by the scars that living in the monkey-filled wasteland had left on my fragile and delicate heart, but in spite of my trauma, the wagon continued at a leisurely pace until we reached the entrance of Zibil. Several wagons lined up at the entrance, with our wagon at the end. I assumed there was some kind of procedure required to enter Zibil. It wouldn’t be as easy as passing through Tibar’s entrance. I wondered if this was due to the city’s size. No, it might have been more accurate to say the difference was in the city’s fundamental nature. Tibar was a rest stop and had developed around the road running right through its center, whereas Zibil was less of a transportation mecca.
Soon, our wagon’s turn arrived. The grandpa and Mr. Chotos handled the formalities with the gatekeepers at the station.
Ah, Mr. Chotos paid the gatekeeper. Is it all right that I’m not chipping in? I don’t mind splitting the cost. As I watched, I overheard Mr. Chotos explaining that the two passengers in the wagon were his children. I’m his son now?! How humiliating!
“Hmph…” I looked away. Well, I’ll forgive you for today. I can be lenient.
After we safely finished the inspection, our wagon passed through the gate and entered the urban townscape of Zibil. It sure was lively inside the gates. There were far more people here than in Tibar.
It was nearly evening, but despite it being far past the height of the work day, a ton of people were running about. I wondered where they were going.

The four of us disembarked on the stone-paved road just beyond the gate. We said our thanks to the old driver, and he headed off on his way. Teru's energetic and gracious thanks made the driver break out into a broad smile. No way could Mr. Chotos or I pull off such a charming stunt.
Hey, Gol. Don't keep staring at me, go properly thank the grandpa. I squished Gol's cheeks between my hands and made her face the driver. Since Gol never resisted my actions, she smoothly turned. However, when I let go, her face swung back to my direction. Her crimson eyes never left my face.
Are you a boomerang? Hey, you can't do that. You have to properly thank the man. I once again squished Gol's cheeks and turned her face to him. But the moment I released her, her head swung right back to me. "Argh, how stubborn."
Squish. Swing.
Squish. Swing. Squish.
After repeating this scuffle with Gol several times, I suddenly noticed Mr. Chotos was once more looking at me with great pity. I cried in my heart.
After parting ways with the old driver, we walked down the street. "There sure are a lot of people in the city, huh?" I said.
"Yeah, this place is big for Sadie territory," said Mr. Chotos. "But there's a lot of dubious merchants who like to set up shop in these densely packed places, so you have to be careful."
"Hmm… So are we heading to the Paisley Company now?" I asked.
Mr. Chotos shook his head. "It's too late today. The counter's been closed already, so we'll head to the Company tomorrow."
Ah, then I suppose it keeps similar business hours to a bank. "Then where are we staying tonight?" I asked.
"Hmm, I've come to this city many times. I know an inn with good food. Let's stay there," Mr. Chotos replied with a bright smile.
"Heh. How much will it cost?"
"Hm, I believe one room was one silver coin."
Oh, one silver coin is it?
"He he. Such a price'll let you stay at a decent inn," I declared, full of confidence. *How about that, Mister? I know prices now!*
"Why do you sound like you're bragging? You remember I was the one who taught you local market prices, yes?"
"Hmph. I don't cling to the past."
Mr. Chotos sighed. "Nemaki, as long as you don't speak, you'll be received as a skilled, dignified golem wielder. In the future, I think it might be better if you kept your mouth shut in front of everyone but me."
"Oh yeah? What are you saying, you damn barcode? Are you trying to pick a fight? Fine. I accept your challenge."
"Hey! Like I said, don't call my amazing haircut a—a 'bahcode' or any other strange, weird name like that!"

“Listen, you! No matter what you do, you can’t keep running away from your true self!”
While Mr. Chotos and I descended into an ugly, noisy argument, Teru looked up with a delighted smile. Gol, meanwhile, continued quietly walking just behind me.
The gray streets of Zibil were slowly dyed amber by the sunset, and four shadows stretched long and close over the cobblestones.

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We arrived at the inn just a bit before sunset. A horseshoe emblem was drawn on the wooden signboard hanging over the entrance. It seemed this inn had originally been built for traveling merchants and peddlers, as there was a row of roofed spaces for parking wagons. It felt like a kind of motel, so for someone not from this world, it was utterly intriguing. It was also Teru’s first time in an inn, and she shared my fascination.
We had dinner in the bar attached to the inn before being shown to our room. Mr. Chotos’s judgment was good, at least in this regard. The meal was delicious and the inn had a rather clean, pleasant feeling. We also decided to share one room between the four of us since the bill was per room, which made it the better option financially.
For this party formation, two beds in one room was just right. Firstly, Mr. Chotos and Teru obviously had to sleep together. It wasn’t a particularly large bed and would have been terrible to sleep on every day, but it was fine for just one night. And even if this parent-child duo was unable to get a good night’s rest, they would probably be fast asleep in the wagon when we headed back.
I’m sorry to say, but the other bed was for me alone. As for Gol, I intended to make a special bed for her on the floor.
“Just a moment, Gol. I’ll set up a wonderful bed for you.” Before we went to our room, I had asked to borrow several layers of thick, soft blankets from the innkeeper. These I now spread near my bed. Finally, I prepared a comforter. With this, I completed a fluffy bed for a golem.
I knew how to do this from my experiences in dog-ownership. No matter how precious you find your partner, or how close you are…you cannot let them sleep in your bed. Although this may seem heartless at first glance, it’s an essential line to draw in order to ensure humans and dogs can happily coexist.
To tell you the truth, though, I only stopped my dog from getting on my bed when I went to sleep. Otherwise, I usually let him wander freely. This wasn’t great for discipline. I mean, look, it started with my cat. He frequently stayed in my room, and he wouldn’t listen to anything I said. He definitely slept on my bed without my permission. And if the cat was on my bed, how could I refuse the dog? That was too sad.

My partner in this world, Gol, really wanted to get on my bed, and she tried to do so every time we had one. I knew she was innocent and I had great sympathy, but at night I had to harden my heart and put her back on the blanket on the floor. This was a habit I had strictly observed since our time in the basin hideout.
“Hey, Nemaki, it’s about time we sleep, so I’ll turn off the lights.” Mr. Chotos called from the other bed.
“Oh, okay.”
“G’night, Mr. Nemaki.”
“Mmhm, good night, Teru.”
Mr. Chotos covered the mana tool providing light to our room with a cloth and the world dimmed. The light that leaked out from the cloth was only as bright as a miniature light bulb.
This was that same strange lighting device that operated on a timer mechanism. They were mana tools with the Lightning attribute and reproduced a beginner Lightning spell, so once you imbued mana into one, it would remain lit for a predetermined amount of time. In other words, there was no switch that could automatically turn it off. As such, you needed to use a cloth to adjust its brightness.
This inn provided covering cloths of various thicknesses. As a matter of fact, several such cloths had been left in the bedroom where I was staying at Mr. Chotos’s house. However, I hadn’t known what they were, and I had just used them to wipe down Gol.
That meant the piece of cloth that Gol was suddenly holding that first night was one of these adjustment cloths. While I had been engrossed in my investigation of the lighting device, she had carefully picked out the softest one and secretly wet it in the kitchen sink. Her obsession with being wiped down was fearsome.
Finally, the room’s light turned off. Gol was acting well-behaved in the makeshift bed, so I closed my eyes and sank into the fairly soft bed of this fairly decent inn. My consciousness gradually faded into a gentle slumber.
Just then, I thought I heard a faint creak, but it was so quiet that no one else would have noticed. It might have been my imagination, but I felt like something *warm* slipped beneath my blanket. I felt like this warm, soft thing often pushed against me in my daily life. I wasn’t the least bit wary of something so familiar and gentle.
More importantly, the snuggles of this blanket-intruder didn’t feel at all uncomfortable. Their actions were natural and dexterous, as if they did this every day.
In any case, by the time it happened, I wasn’t conscious enough to protest.

Chapter 14:
Company and Branch Manager

I OPENED MY EYES to the dim, pale light of dawn. Two spellbound crimson eyes peered into my face.
Whoa, your face is so close! O-oh, it's just Gol…
This always surprised me, and I really wanted her to stop doing it. I did wake up, though.
"Good morning, Gol. You get up early every morning, don't you?"
Waking up to Gol bending over me reminded me of how my dog used to lick my sleeping face to wake me up. Golems really were dogs… However, Gol didn't slobber over my face, so all things considered, she was quite tame.

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It was still early in the morning and felt a bit chilly. The white light of the sun shone through the cobblestone alleys between the rows of buildings. In that light, we left the inn and departed for the Paisley Company's Zibil branch office.
We were an odd group, composed of the Sorcerer King, his golem, and an old man and his five-year-old child.
Even though the morning sun was still climbing over the horizon, the people of Zibil were already coming and going. It seemed the people of this world woke up pretty early. Come to think of it, even Master Speria had woken up before daybreak, although I think that had simply been because the monkeys always attacked him at sunrise.
Before long, we arrived at the entrance of our destination. I stood in front of the door and gazed up at the impressive building. This Paisley Company branch office was profoundly huge by this world's standards.
It was a two-story building made of wood, but it was several times larger than the other buildings in the area. The architectural style was also different, with clearly expensive and high-class decorative features like columns and ornate latticework.
Mr. Chotos's shop had seemed slightly on the large side, but compared to the building in front of me, his was nothing more than a meager shop. There could be no doubt that this company was immensely profitable.
"Well, at any rate, I just want to hurry up and finish so we can grab some breakfast…" I said, letting out a pale breath as I looked up at the Company building's decorative roof.
We hadn't yet eaten. Right after we woke, we all got dressed and left the inn to head straight to the Company. Mr. Chotos had probably been so nervous that he forgot about breakfast. He didn't even hear my indirect

demand. A thin shadow lined his lower eyelids, meaning he probably hadn't slept very soundly.
Well, that was a given. Even though we had only dealt with an outside party sent by the Company, we'd still indirectly had a dispute with them the other day. Then again, it was really my Gol who was the most guilty.
In any case, our goal for today was to peacefully repay the debt. This was an extremely ordinary procedure, so normally I would've let Mr. Chotos go to the Company by himself, but I decided to accompany him. I thought it would be a good opportunity to observe the business processes and study the contractual terms of this world. In other words, it was social studies.
It wasn't like I was worried about Mr. Chotos or anything. I was a cultured man and had a passion for learning. I just so happened to get a sudden urge to learn about society. I didn't care about this guy at all.
I really, really need you to understand that!
In a vast and splendid wooden entrance hall, a well-dressed, middle-aged representative of the Company greeted us. He was in his early fifties with salt-and-pepper hair and wore a monocle, but I was surprised to see he was quite the beauty. He certainly stood in stark contrast to Mr. Chotos. Even though they were both old men, for there to be such a difference between them… The gods were truly unfair.
I ask of you to please endow upon my ugly old man even just 1 percent of the ingredients you used to make this handsome, dashing gentleman.
With the two of them facing each other like this, my old man was just too pitiful.
Two younger men stood on either side of the dashing man. *Whoa, these guys are also astonishing beauties*. They had a kind of strange, delicate feel to them, so rather than looking manly-man cool, they were more the type of beautiful the average woman would prefer.
This was really bad! Our party of the disheartened Mr. Chotos and the pathetic-looking me had lost to this gorgeous army before the battle even began.
Hey, mister, I'm dropping out of this fight…
The first one to open their mouth was the dashing, monocle-wearing man. "Why, hello, Mr. Chotos. Welcome to our office. To take time out of your busy schedule and come all this way to our humble branch…I'm very much obliged."
His voice had the lovely tenor of an actor, and as he greeted Mr. Chotos in his genteel manner, he led us inside. Even though we had caused such a ruckus the other day, no resentment was evident in his attitude, and I detected no signs of antagonism. What an extremely adult response.
Once inside, the gentleman lowered his head in such a precise manner that it almost seemed unnatural, like a mannequin. "I say, I heard of some horrid mismanagement by an outside party we hired to collect your debt," he apologized to Mr. Chotos. "I deeply regret it, and I apologize for any

inconvenience this caused you. The staff member in charge of the incident will be severely reprimanded."
Hmph. So it really was mismanagement. Yeah, that's right. Of course. No proper loan company would hire such an aggressive group to collect debts.
I could overlook this mistake. However, if they made another scandalous error in judgment, no matter how gentle a man I was, I wouldn't stand for it. A lawsuit would be coming their way.
I decided to believe their words for now. I was just an outsider, after all. I had no basis on which to judge them.
At last, Mr. Chotos sat at the reception desk and began the procedure to repay his debt. I stood behind him and looked over the contract document he held while I propped up Teru in my arms. She was a little drowsy, but that couldn't be helped, since it was still early in the morning.
Huh, I guess this is how contracts look in this other world.
From what I could tell, this one required signatures from both parties. The texture of the paper was smooth, and even at a glance I could tell it was special. For some reason, I felt that it resembled Selvei scrip. Had some spell been cast on it as well? The scrips didn't burn, so could it be that important documents in this world were thus protected to prevent damage, or even forgery?
At any rate, I was bored. Standing around with Teru was so mind-numbing that I finally began to read the contract's contents. In fact, I had a rare burst of motivation to meticulously examine the calculations, since they would concern Mr. Chotos and Teru for the rest of their lives. That was why, instead of like when I flippantly counted my coins on the restaurant counter, or when I bought as many spare pairs of underwear as Gol wanted without thinking about conserving my funds, I focused in with real clarity of mind and assumed the rarest of serious-about-money modes.
At first, I was primarily interested in the unique phrases this world used in contracts, but as I went on, my serious mind gradually came to understand what I was reading, and I unconsciously raised my voice in astonishment.
"What?!"
What was with this interest rate? Were they serious?! This was worse than the sort of thing you would've seen in the Japanese consumer credit crisis before the 2000s reform laws. Even the brutally high interest rates of the Edo period hadn't been this cruel.
Worse, when I read more closely, the Company's calculation method proved downright wicked. These nasty credit tricks felt strangely modern to me. In any case, with this contract, the payments would have swelled rapidly from interest before Mr. Chotos even realized it. It would have been a cyclic hell where no matter how much he paid back, the debt would increase.
This was unreasonable. The contract reeked of malicious intent to destroy the borrower and devour their life. Was the remorseless Paisley Company some kind of *gaki* or other hungry ghost…? Even if I dreamt up an idea like this, I wouldn't be able to stomach putting it into action.

In my arms, Teru mumbled, half-asleep. I gently stroked her back as I stood silently in the lobby. Now I had seen firsthand the absurd interest rate concocted by these actors who played innocents. Meanwhile, in my mind's eye, I saw an unattractive middle-aged man devoted to his family. He cried tears of happiness as he thought he might have finally obtained the money to pay for the medicine for his sick wife and daughter.

I looked up in a daze at the gorgeous interior of the office. This beautiful building was built on the sorrowful tears of naïve and kindhearted men like Mr. Chotos. A terrible haze weighed down on my chest, smothering me.

All this while, Mr. Chotos proceeded reading and signing the contract. One glimpse of the contents had disgusted me, but at least he would be freed of it today.

Only something was bothering me. That dashing, bespectacled man sitting opposite the reception desk wasn't looking at Mr. Chotos—rather, he was looking straight at me where I stood behind my merchant companion. In fact, ever since he'd greeted us, his gaze had been fixed on me.

As for my old man, he hadn't realized this at all; he was far too nervous. An old man can only be an old man, after all.

The genteel middle-aged man studied me intently from behind that single monocle lens, assessing every part of me, and truthfully, it didn't feel very comfortable.

Hey, stop that. Don't look at my body with such lewd eyes! Sorry for you, but I don't swing that way! I was unnecessarily frightened by the dashing man's gaze, but another thing was actually bothering me even more: Gol. Gol had moved strangely ever since we entered the office building. She stuck close behind me as if snuggling me like usual, except for some reason, she occasionally fidgeted as if ready to move in front of me.

Now Gol was looking toward the back of the lobby. Weird. She mostly only looked away from me when she discovered a monkey, and she only moved in front of me to fight or protect me. But I couldn't imagine a monkey, dinosaur, or punk inside this elegant office building.

Near as I could tell, Gol was looking at a space that operated like a waiting room. Even though it was early in the morning, plenty of people sat there. I followed her line of sight until I locked eyes with another man. He was young, with a handsome face, and he wore an eye patch over his left eye. He too was quite the beauty. The moment our eyes met, the man was clearly shaken.

What's up with this guy?

Just when I was getting suspicious, Mr. Chotos finished the procedure and stood. "Sorry for making you wait, Nemaki. I've safely repaid the debt."

"Oh, did you? That's fantastic."

I casually turned to respond to Mr. Chotos, but when I looked back toward the waiting area, the eye-patched man was no longer there. I scanned the lobby, but he was nowhere to be seen. It was almost like he had disappeared into thin air.

“Huh, that’s strange. I’m sure he was there a moment ago…”
“What’s wrong, Nemaki?” Mr. Chotos had noticed my restless stare.
“No, it’s just, there was a man sitting over there…” I was about to point to the waiting area when I realized something. Ah. No pointing for me, not when I was holding Teru.
With our business done, we left the Company building. As we exited, we passed other personnel. Each and every one was an unbelievable beauty. Actually, everyone here was unspeakably gorgeous, including the staff members I’d met during the repayment.
In fact, something felt kind of…off. Ever since reaching human civilization, I’d seen all sorts of folks. Many looked like Westerners, and some sported unusual hair colors, but everyone was pretty much ordinary. This was a wondrous world with a beautiful tapestry of many cultures, but it definitely wasn’t a world straight out of a fairy tale filled with people of unusual loveliness.
To be fair, I had yet to grasp this world’s beauty standard. Culture has a dramatic effect on how people assess appearances. Even within the same cultural sphere, time can greatly change these criteria. Historically, what determines whether a person’s face is considered beautiful or ugly is a fleeting thing. For example, see the Heian period, where women with round faces and narrow eyes were preferred. However, during the Warring States period, fat, bearded men were the most popular.
In the restaurant where I enjoyed a baked sempiol, Pizzaman had complimented Gol by calling her an absolute beauty, so I could at least say with certainty that Gol was considered lovely according to this world’s standards. Based on this, it was possible that this world’s aesthetic sensibility resembled that of my original world.
Even so, it was possible that for a work of art as charming as Gol, changes in culture and time made no difference. For example, when modern folks like me look at the *Pietà* in St. Peter’s Basilica, we’re still taken aback by its unbearable beauty. It was frankly weird of me to assume the people in this office were beautiful just because they aligned with my sense of beauty as a modern Japanese person.
Additionally, when it came to my Gol, she was a golem, not a human. Maybe golems had their own separate standard of aesthetics, like dogs in a dog show. It was possible Pizzaman had complimented her on that basis.
Ah, I think I might have digressed a bit too far… In other words, the crux of this story was what again?
Right: “It was difficult to say whether this world’s beauty standard was exactly the same as that of my original world.” At the very least, it would have been normal to see some slight deviation.
However, each and every one of the personnel of this Paisley Company was beautiful in every imaginable way by my standards as a modern Japanese citizen. There was not a single exception.

Of course, it was possible this was all pure coincidence. Say, if the Company's personnel were chosen solely based on the Company's preferred facial type, it might explain their negligence in other areas—though it would make whoever was in charge of human resources one of the most incompetent people ever. If this beauty standard were only for selecting receptionists, it could be excused, but it looked like practically all the staff were hired this way. If I were the manager, I'd fire that HR bozo in two seconds.

Besides, I wasn't really concerned with what was going on in the human resources department at the Paisley Company. I would never need to deal with them, especially not after this.

Usually, I would ignore this kind of discomfort. But a little—really just a little—at that moment, I had an incomprehensibly bad premonition.

I'm going to change topics for a bit here. As I explained before, this world's standard of external beauty was still wrapped in mystery. Do you understand where I'm heading?

In short, at that moment, it was still possible that I was living the dream—you know, the one where I was an outstandingly handsome man to the women of this world. That's right. This was still a very real possibility, my friends!

But you know… Well, I'd experienced something disheartening during my shopping trip in Tibar. Neither the female merchants nor the women on the street would have any real contact with me. When they first spoke to me, the young women of this world wore bright, flowery smiles, but after exchanging a few friendly words, they would inevitably start to pale. In the end, they would run off. No exceptions.

Right before each of these women fled, they'd stopped looking at my face. Their eyes were averted, as if they couldn't even bear to behold the shape of my head. Instead, for some reason, they all stared at the space just behind me, their faces frozen in fear.

Yeah… The probability that I was considered an outstandingly unattractive man was devastatingly high. As such, I feared anything that might force me to face the reality of this world's beauty standards.

I'm starting to feel depressed, so let's stop talking about it.

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The afternoon sun shone brightly over the city of Zibil as we left the Paisley Company behind.

"With this, finally…" Mr. Chotos spoke softly, as if he were releasing everything that had been pent up inside his chest. "I've finally settled my debt with the Company…"

"So you have. Well, I'm glad for you," I said.

"I was relieved from the bottom of my heart. I wonder how long it's been since I've felt so at peace. Thank you, Nemaki. I really, truly appreciate it."

“Huh? Ah, yeah.”
Mr. Chotos was moved to tears. Ah, what an ugly face. Hey, stop that. Maybe I should have said, While you didn’t forget to show me gratitude despite being who you are, aren’t you getting a bit lax? Your battle starts now! You’ve repaid your debt, but you’re only at square one of rebuilding your life. Your shop shelves are barren, and your customer’s footsteps echo far, far away. You also have to raise Teru while you’re managing your shop. That’s at least three kinds of normal hardship stacked on top of each other, don’t you think? Do you get it? Huh, mister?
In spite of my entirely sensible and composed, albeit unvoiced, concern, Mr. Chotos wiped his sweat and tears as he smiled, relieved. “Ah ha ha… Still, to think that Sir Spero himself would come out. I was so nervous that I was drenched in sweat.”
“Sir Spero?”
“You know, the man who greeted us at the office and handled the repayment procedure? The fellow with the monocle.”
Ah. Could he be talking about that dashing, bespectacled, middle-aged man with a strange fetish for me? Now that he said it, I realized the guy *had* seemed to be of a rather high position. “Is that man a big deal or something?”
“He’s the branch manager. And of course he’s a big deal; he’s Paisley Company. The average merchant won’t ever reach such a position. I believe he’s also from the Kinas territory, where the main branch is located.”
Hmm…Kinas, huh? Well, whatever. That branch manager seemed to have a variety of dangerous qualities, so there was nothing better to do than to forget the whole thing. I was a man known for his strategic memory loss.
“Well, I don’t really care. More importantly, how about we all go and eat a baked sempiol?”
“What?! You don’t care? You’re the one who asked!” Mr. Chotos was back to his normal self, sighing with an astonished face, but he suddenly looked shocked. “Ah! Now that you mention it, yeah. We haven’t had breakfast yet. I was so nervous that it completely slipped my mind.”
“You just realized it now?! You’re so slow, mister!”
As we yapped at each other, we headed to a cozy hole-in-the-wall by the street. In all that time, the sleeping lady in my arms hadn’t opened her eyes. My arms were starting to lose feeling.

Chapter 15:
Mist and Embrace

WITH THE DEBT to the Paisley Company repaid, it was time to say goodbye to the city of Zibil. We had our late breakfast before we headed to the plaza by the city's main gate. The grandpa who'd driven us here would be waiting for us in a corner of the plaza, as we had arranged to hitch a ride on the way back to Tibar as well.

We took a lively street to the plaza, which was lined with a multitude of vendors. Various goods were displayed on carpets spread over the cobblestone.

One of the street vendors called out to me. "You, the handsome spellcaster! Come and take a look at my wares. In fact, I've just gotten my hands on a damn amazin' ancient mana tool."

"An ancient mana tool, you say?" I couldn't help but stop when I was called handsome. Also, Chotos had said ancient mana tools were a rare sort.

"Look right here." The street vendor showed me a wooden carving that resembled a poorly made terracotta figure.

Huh? This was the first time I'd seen a wooden mana tool. All the mana tools in Mr. Chotos's shop were made of some unknown material that resembled stone or resin. Furthermore, the paint on this doll's surface seemed kind of cheap. Rather than a mana tool, it looked like a tawdry souvenir.

"What magic does this mana tool possess?"

"What a wonderful question. This fellow here is, could you believe it, a legendary ancient mana tool blessed by the goddess of love and desire, Dalmaty. Just by holdin' it, all the women of the world will become your captives. A terrible little thing it is."

"Wha—?" Impossible. There was no way. Rationally thinking, there was absolutely no way.

No, wait. Calm down. Pull yourself together, me. Remember, this is a world where spells and dragons exist. Compared to monsters that ignored the laws of nature like that ancient Earth Dragon, the existence of an item that made you popular was both feasible and, frankly, adorable.

In that case, this street vendor had to be telling the truth! If I got my hand on the goddess of love's ancient mana tool, would I finally be freed from my life overflowing with old men?

I swallowed. "May I ask…how much this costs?"

"This guy's so powerful I'd hate to risk it bein' abused. Normally, I wouldn't sell 'im to just anyone, but…I trust a man like you, so how 'bout I give you a special limited-time deal of just sixteen gold coins, hm?"

"S-sixteen gold coins!" How could this be? I currently had five gold coins and fourteen silver. The rest were copper. This was not remotely enough. I

dropped my shoulders, heartbroken. “Unfortunately, I only have five gold on me right now…”
“Oh! You’re truly a lucky one!”
“Huh?”
“Yes, yes. Honest truth, I’m in the middle of a huge sale, so the price’s been cut in half to just eight gold! Plus, the festival to celebrate that holy Saint of the Stone’s birthday is just next month. Since you have the same lucky black hair as the saint, I’ll deduct another three gold. And that makes it, bang, five gold coins! How ’bout it? Take it, you thief!”
“Wha…?!”
Ridiculous! How could that be? For some wild, unexpected reasons, the price had taken a sudden dive?! A discount of over ten gold coins would make even Old Dancy from the bookstore turn pale.
In other words, was this too good to pass up? As I listened to this street vendor’s pitch, I was overcome with the feeling that if I didn’t buy this tool, I’d miss out on the chance of a lifetime. If I let this opportunity escape me, it might never come again. And when I considered the absolutely dire consequences of being unpopular for the rest of my life…
Wait. If I buy this mana tool, I’ll exhaust my funds. Maybe I need to deliberate more before making a decision… Damn, it was no good! The promise of being popular with all the women in the world was far too tempting. My desire was already as large as Antarctica. I was being crushed by a continent’s worth of pressure, and I couldn’t think! *Save me, Gol. What should I do?*
At my wits’ end, I turned to Gol behind me. She hadn’t even bothered to look at the street vendor’s wares. Her warm gaze was fixed, as ever, on me. It felt like she was saying: *“It’s fine. You can buy whatever you want.”*
Right… Gol didn’t pay any real attention to other people. She didn’t even know which of the goods I was so stressed about. In the end, I would have to make the decision myself.
Fine. I could do it.
“All right…”
A mere five gold coins was nothing, if I could be popular with the ladies. I’d lose all my money at once, but I doubted it would kill me. Starting tomorrow, the Sorcerer King would retire and change jobs—I would be a Matagi hunter with Gol.
Committing to my new self-sustaining lifestyle, I rummaged through my black shoulder bag and was about to take out my purse.
“Hey, Nemaki…”
When I turned to the source of the voice, Mr. Chotos firmly gripped my shoulder.
What’s wrong, mister? Making kind of a scary face there…

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“Nemaki, you… How can I put this…? You really are a disappointing man.”
Mr. Chotos walked next to me, and his pitying expression had made an inglorious comeback.
Just a moment ago, the street vendor had departed as if he were fleeing Mr. Chotos’s scowl, so in the end, I missed my chance to buy the ancient mana tool of the goddess of love. Thus, my plan to live a rose-colored harem life in another world ended in failure. I was full of regret.
Damn, if only this old man hadn’t gotten in the way…
I showered Mr. Chotos with hateful glares, but he only shook his head as he sighed. “It might not be a good idea to let you walk around with too much money.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“You know exactly what I mean. Just hurry up and find a wife who’ll keep a good hold on your purse strings, okay?”
Hey, barcode, what’s with that remark?! You’re the one who stole my opportunity to get a wife!
We passed several streets and met the old wagon driver in front of the city’s main gate. The familiar wagon was waiting for us in a corner of the plaza.
Just like us, the grandpa appeared to have finished his business in Zibil. This grandpa was actually Mr. Chotos’s neighbor and made his living by selling fruits and vegetables. He had retired and left the business to his son and daughter-in-law, but he occasionally helped out with restocking and deliveries.
When we boarded the covered wagon, I noticed the cargo was completely different. Only the thick blanket we sat on remained unchanged. Could it be this grandpa had gone out of his way to prepare a comfortable area for us by packing especially lightly…?
And here I thought he’d maxed out my affection points! If I’d been a widow of many lonely years, I would have fallen for him right there.
At last, we safely departed from the gates of the city of Zibil. I chatted with Mr. Chotos as we ate a citrus fruit, which the driver had shared and Gol had most elegantly cut.
Around forty minutes after we left, I had just begun to doze off when my head suddenly jolted. Immediately afterward, my whole body began to vibrate. I thought this suspicious and raised my head.
“Hey, don’t you think the wagon’s shaking a lot?” I asked.
“We go click and clack. Clickety-clack!” Teru agreed.
How sweet.
Anyway, it seemed the source of these vibrations was the fact that the entire wagon was violently shaking. The wagon’s speed also seemed to have slowed considerably. A malfunction, perhaps? It felt like when a car loses a tire on the highway.
“Ugh… Wh-what?” Mr. Chotos finally opened his eyes.
Mister, you were way too conked out! Then again, that’s probably because you were too nervous to sleep last night, so it can’t be helped.

At that moment, the grandpa's perplexed voice called to us from the driver's seat. "Seems like the wagon's a bit off. Might be hard to go on like this."
The wagon continued slowly before it stopped on the side of the road.
"I wonder what happened… I'm gonna take a look," the grandpa said and disembarked.
After a bit, I heard rattling beneath our feet. It appeared he was examining a broken part of the undercarriage.
"Let me have a look. It may be something within my field of expertise." Mr. Chotos also climbed down.
Left behind, I popped my head through the back opening in the canopy and looked outside. Teru followed me and also stuck her head out like a baby kangaroo.
"A bunch of trees!" Teru said, her eyes sparkling.
"That's right. There are a lot of trees."
We had come to a stop in the middle of a forest teeming with evergreens. The north-south road was largely lined with open fields, but we were in a rare stretch. We looked out over a wide meadow surrounded by dense greenery. Luckily, from this meadow, we still had an open view of the sky.
"Mmhm, mmhm. The cries of the mana beasts echo in the forest…" Teru began to sing in high spirits, though slightly out of tune.
"Amazing. You're even good at singing."
The lyrics were a bit disturbing, but I could put that aside. As I've said, it's critical to praise a child to promote their growth.
Delighted by the compliment, Teru rocked while getting close to my face. The little girl seemed to be truly enjoying herself. While we might have gone on this trip to repay her father's debt, it had been a fun vacation for her. One day, when this child grew older, I hoped this wonderful journey with Gol and I would endure as one of her precious memories.
"Teru, has this trip been fun?"
"Yeah!"
"I see. That's—whoa!"
While Teru and I were laughing together, Gol suddenly pushed her face between us. Because of that, the narrow opening in the canopy was now jam-packed with three heads.
"Hey, it's kinda tight now, Gol."
Gol just began to rub her cheek against mine. Her face felt squishy and tickled. She was always tender and hesitant when she touched me, but for some reason, this cheek-rubbing felt somewhat desperate.
While I wore a confused face, baptized by my partner's cheek rubs, Mr. Chotos and the grandpa came out from beneath the wagon. The two old men brushed the dust from their clothes and spoke to each other in solemn tones.
"To think the Wind flotation box would break down like that… I just sent it in for maintenance."

“It’s a little baffling, yeah. In any case, if it’s what I think it is, I should be able to do some temporary repairs.”
“Oh, really?”
“Yeah, it might take some time, but I’ll see what I can do.”
“Much appreciated. I’m glad you’re riding with me, Mr. Chotos. If you weren’t here, I’d have been stuck in this awful place with no help in sight…”
I listened to this while Gol continued to rub her cheek against mine. This “Wind flotation box” had to be that strange, box-looking apparatus on the bottom of the wagon. If Mr. Chotos could repair it, it was certainly another mana tool. Also, the way Mr. Chotos talked made it sound like he was going to fix a home appliance. Did that mean a mana tool shop was like an electronics store?
Mr. Chotos took a small tool from inside of his bag and started fiddling underneath the wagon. *You brought the tools of your trade on a trip? Quite the professional mindset, mister.*
I watched Mr. Chotos work for a bit, but it seemed the repairs would take a while. As such, I decided to disembark as well. I slipped through the canopy opening and jumped down. “Gol, come here.”
When I called her name, Gol delightedly perked up her long ears and dropped down beside me. As usual, her landing made practically no sound.
With all the adults out of the wagon, Teru looked lonely being left all alone. *Please don’t do that. I can’t resist such a face.* Indeed, I couldn’t. I lifted her from the wagon and carried her.
“Now then. We should patrol the area for a bit, I guess.”
The reason I disembarked was, of course, not because I was thinking about helping Mr. Chotos with his repairs. Rather, I had come to stand on the ground because I knew Gol would follow me there. You see, that strange monkey-capturing radar all golems come equipped with—the “Surface Detection” ability—requires them to have direct bodily contact with the ground.
I had learned this quite recently in conversation with Mr. Chotos. It was still somewhat mortifying to admit, but this mana tool merchant was far more knowledgeable about golems than I. According to him, this Surface Detection was similar to a submarine’s sonar device, only it sensed enemies by their vibrations on the ground. It seemed Gol could observe her surroundings by sending out a wave of mana.
As you might guess, Surface Detection wasn’t exactly flawless. Firstly, it couldn’t function without ground contact, and secondly, it was practically useless against anything that could fly. However, shrine golems that had crystalline photoreceptors could compensate for the missing information with additional visual analysis.
Anyway, the wagon was currently parked in a forest, far from anyone who might see us if we ran into trouble. With the rumors of mana beast victims on my mind, I thought it best to utilize Gol’s Surface Detection.

I wanted to experiment with whether Gol could use her Surface Detection on, for example, a wood-paneled floor. Frankly, she might even have been able to use it in the wagon. However, now wasn't the time for scientific pursuits. I was not a careless man, and I needed to be absolutely sure of our results.
Also, I…have a confession. I was completely terrified by that rumor of the crazy pyromaniac Flame Bicorn.
I crouched beside Mr. Chotos as he repaired the Wind flotation box. I wasn't really thinking about helping him out or anything. "How does it look? Think you can fix it?"
When I asked, Mr. Chotos popped his dirt-covered, sweat-stained face out from underneath the wagon. "Yeah, I think I can make it work. However, it looks like some parts might have been damaged by human hands…"
"Huh? Sabotage?"
"I'm afraid so. By the look of things, it was probably done in Zibil."
What? How horrible. Was this the otherworld equivalent of slashing someone's tires?
"How could they…? Maybe when I stopped for a delivery, someone did this as a prank?" the grandpa said. He was dispirited, hurt, and otherwise at a loss for words.
That damn criminal! How dare they steal my grandpa's smile?! Absolutely unforgivable.
"Whatever the cause, let's finish the repairs and head off as quickly as possible. We can't exactly stay here," Mr. Chotos said as he crawled back under the wagon.
Mr. Chotos looked like he was having a hard time working between the wagon and ground. His face was red and slick with sweat.
I called out to him again, "Hey, mister?"
"What's up, Nemaki?"
"Um, well…is there anything I can do to help?"
"What? You don't know anything about mana tools, right? I don't think there's anything you can do. I'll handle this, so why don't you go play with Teru?"
"Wh-wha?!"
You barcode! Don't get on your high horse just because someone offered you help! Got it? Hmph!

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It had been around thirty minutes since the wagon stopped. Mr. Chotos was still underneath it, doing his best.
Up until this point, the grandpa had been feeding his horses some grass and carefully checking for any problems with their legs and horseshoes. Now he was resting, leaning against the side of the wagon and dozing off.

As for me, I had received a notification of noninclusion from Mr. Chotos, so I was paired with the bored little lady. As a knight, it was an honor.
The two of us chatted as we sat on the grass like it was a plush carpet, and we played around by throwing leaves at each other. Meanwhile, Gol sat next to us and quietly watched. However, when Teru shyly fidgeted and leaned in to whisper a secret in my ear, Gol suddenly came between us and snatched Teru away. Well, this always happened. Teru and I were used to her abductions.
Gol probably loved small children so much that when watching one move as cutely as Teru did, her maternal instincts exploded beyond the point of endurance. She just wanted to monopolize tiny Teru. *My partner really does love kids.*
This is a bit of a digression, but the secret Little Girl-senpai was shyly trying to share was about how she had wet her bed last month.
"Welp, I've been freed once again." Having been relieved of my job of babysitting knight, I casually took in our surroundings…which was when I noticed they were being swallowed up by a white haze. "Wha…? Mist?"
I hadn't ever seen mist in this world. We were in the depths of a forest where the sun couldn't reach, though, so it wasn't all *that* strange. When I looked again, everything around us was enveloped by a milk-white curtain so thick that I could barely make out the outline of the trees.
Honestly, it felt ominous, like the kind of setting where a ghost might appear. Still, this was a world with weird monkeys covered in stones, an immortal dinosaur, and a crazy arsonist horse. I couldn't be surprised by something like a ghost.
I'm sorry; I lied. If a ghost really did appear, my rational mind would give up trying to understand the situation and begin to display a beautiful scene of the Alps backed by classical music.
As I sat on the grass trying to master my agitation, I suddenly felt a soft white embrace. It was Gol. What's up, partner? Do you want to play? I'm sorry, I'm a bit busy developing a scientific thesis on the existence of ghosts in this world—
Ah. There was nothing to do. I was about to be buried face-deep in the soft valley of Gol's chest.
At that moment, a blinding scarlet light flooded the meadow and I squinted. Immediately after, an enormous ball of blazing fire crashed into Gol's back.

Chapter 16:
Purple Robe and Red Staff

THE BALL OF FLAMES reflected off Gol's back, diffusing into a magnificent spray of particles.

What was this? What exactly had happened? Strangely, despite the ferocity of the flames, I barely felt any heat.

Behind me, Teru let out a small scream. The horses whinnied, waking the old driver from his nap. Mr. Chotos also scrambled out from beneath the wagon.

Thank goodness. It looked like everyone was fine.

"Hey, you all right, Gol?! You're not burnt or anything?" I quickly slipped out of Gol's embrace and checked her back.

Spotless. Slick and smooth. Indeed, it was unnaturally fine. Even though it had come into direct contact with an intense flame, Gol's white skin didn't feel remotely hot. I couldn't find a trace of soot.

When I stroked her back in concern, her long ears fluttered contentedly. Good; she seemed energetic as usual. On the other hand, Gol's crimson eyes were fixed somewhere beyond the mist.

I followed her gaze and strained my eyes into that great blank white. "That large ball of fire was an attack, right…?"

The enormous fireball had come flying at me from within the mist. I'd never heard of such a natural phenomenon. This was probably some fire spell, or even fire sorcery.

My first thought was of the crazy pyromaniac Flame Bicorn of rumor. At the same time, that didn't feel right. How could the Flame Bicorn elude Gol's notice? Her Surface Detection was perfect. Besides, I didn't think Gol had sensed anything suspicious until the second before the fireball hurtled toward us.

Since I was no hunter, I only ever knew about incoming wildlife when Gol stepped into her protective position because *she* sensed an unfamiliar presence. If she had sensed the suspicious horse earlier, she would've taken a defensive stance.

To be fair, the ancient Earth Dragon had eluded Gol's detection, but according to Master Speria, that dinosaur was half-spirit or something, and as one of the four god-saurs of this world, it was an exception to every rule. We couldn't possibly have run into another absurdly rare phenomena, could we?

My doubt was spot on. The one who shot the fireball wasn't the Flame Bicorn.

The mist began to dissipate, and we heard a person's voice. "Wow. Did you see that guy? He made his golem react to a surprise attack from a blind angle. He's a pretty decent wielder, heh."

Figures emerged from the fading mist, chatting amongst themselves.
“Aww, come on! You’re jokin’, right? We cast *Curtain of Haze*, y’know? It’s an advanced anti-detection spell. I can’t believe this guy…”
“Ha, after this, I think I actually believe the rumors that he instantly defeated the Swordbreaker and his crew.”
The group emerged one by one until there were more than ten of them. All of them wore robes similar to mine, meaning they were likely spellcasters. For some reason, they were surprised that I was unharmed. Despite their backhanded praise, they reeked of confidence. One of them was even cackling.
“Oh my, oh my. They were supposed to be burnt to a crisp by my *Flame Bullet* so it would look like the work of a Flame Bicorn. Looks like this is going to be more annoying than we hoped,” a woman standing in the middle of the group muttered in displeasure. She was a female spellcaster holding a uniquely shaped red staff. The moment I caught sight of her, my eyes widened.
“N-no way. Impossible…”
She was an unexpectedly busty spellcaster. Each time she spoke, those two jiggling mountains demanded attention.
W-wait… Don’t misunderstand. Look, I was just surprised from the bottom of my heart by the appearance of a real live busty woman in this bleak world that was barren of any feminine charm. I wasn’t by any means upset, just a bit shocked.
Although it *did* seem she had been the one who shot that fireball. Who exactly were these guys? Was this a gang of highway robbers? Or did they have another goal in mind? To tell you the truth, I couldn’t make sense of anything at that moment.
I glanced at Gol next to me. To tell you the truth, I was a bit concerned. Other than to protect me from the fireball, she hadn’t yet reacted. We had made a promise before entering Tibar, one with the basic activation condition: “an attack from the enemy.” This condition had already been fulfilled.
Normally, the second someone aggressed against me, Gol rushed the enemy like a bullet and knocked down everyone in her path. In fact, given the violence of that fireball, I suspected she might not be satisfied with a beating—she would want to kill them. She might even give in to her base impulses and unleash a chain of frenzied, gruesome techniques.
Gol was especially merciless to those who tried to kill me. Those gruesome techniques always made it seem like she was trying to take mindless, excessive revenge because she could no longer control her emotions. I’d seen far too many monkeys horrifically mangled as a consequence of this self-expression. I hadn’t ultimately been able to bear witness to their grotesque demise, as it had secretly hurt my heart.

As such, I expected—and feared—that these culprits were in for the same treatment. But if so, why was Gol sticking so close and refusing to leave my side?

"Well, this situation does look pretty bad…" I gulped.

After all, behind me were an elderly man, a middle-aged man, and a young girl—three overwhelmingly weak people. I knew Gol would risk her life to protect me, but at the same time, I had a strong suspicion that she wouldn't be as diligent when guarding those three.

Worse, this situation was completely different from our dispute with the debt collector punks. We were far from any human settlements and that fire spell had definitely been meant to kill us. Our opponents were, without a doubt, vicious criminals. They were no simple hired thugs.

But I had to protect children and the elderly no matter what. I had no choice.

I dropped a bit from my standing position, letting the sleeve of my olive-brown robe lightly touch the ground. There, I chanted in a voice low enough that the three people behind me wouldn't notice. "*Earth Battle-Axe*…"

Earth particles gathered inside my sleeve. *Earth Battle-Axe* was a beginner Earth spell described in *Introduction to Spellcrafting IV*. The single-edged axe it created was quite small and lacked the reach of *Earth Spear*, but it was tough enough.

More importantly, because it was small, I could create the weapon in secret and keep it concealed within my sleeve. I coaxed it into a vertical position, holding the handle up and facing the blade downward. Just as the battle-axe neared completion, I activated my sorcery. I concentrated on my new friend, the axe, and made my request.

"Hi, friend axe, this is my first time asking anything of you. Please aid me in protecting an innocent five-year-old and a kind, old gentleman. Oh, and add a bad-mannered middle-aged man while you're at it."

I gripped the handle of the axe and peeked down to check on it. As luck would have it, I now held in my hand an ultra-reliable *jet-black* battle-axe. Honestly, its appearance was a bit fiendish.

All right, control initiated.

No one had noticed my spell. Helpfully, normal Earth-spell weapons were brown; none were this black. Even if the criminal spellcaster gang or my three companions saw the battle-axe now, they would think I'd had it stashed in my sleeve the whole time. As long as I didn't send it flying through the air like an RC toy, anyway.

That was the problem, though. Even though I'd used my sorcery on this *Earth Battle-Axe*, I couldn't make any long-ranged attacks with it lest I expose myself as the Sorcerer King, which would put me at risk. In the end, this little guy would have to stay by my side.

You must understand, however, that, I, of course, wasn't thinking of doing anything reckless like using this axe to fight in melee combat. A man must know his limits. There was another, more legitimate reason for which I had

conjured this weapon and ensorcelled it. In short, it was the only defensive move I could think of that would increase the chances of survival for my three companions. In other words, it was my last resort.
You see, I had realized something unique about being the Sorcerer King while I was using sorcery to fight the monkeys and the ancient Earth Dragon in that miasma-filled wasteland: Whenever I activated my sorcery, my spatial awareness spiked to an absurd level.
Think about it. The first time I used *NTR*, not only was I able to stop several hundreds of stone bullets in the air at the same time, I also managed to accurately and simultaneously return every single one straight into each individual monkey's head. The monkeys were annihilated by that meteor shower, and all the monkeys immediately perished via direct headshot. Not one shot missed.
It had been the same with the fight against the ancient Earth Dragon, during which I fired my *Earth Spear* like a high-speed missile. I had controlled its trajectory to target the dragon's blind spots while rotating it at extreme speeds. Such a feat wouldn't have been possible with my natural human abilities, but it had been with my sorcery-heightened spatial awareness. Using that same power, I now hoped to act as a shield for my companions.
In our group, I likely had the quickest recovery rate and greatest resilience. Then again, I hadn't exactly trained my body or anything, and I didn't want to get hurt, either. But this party relied on me and Gol; the rest were a fragile girl and the elderly. Mr. Chotos might hold out for a bit, but the other two would absolutely die from even the lightest of attacks. I had to protect them.
I glanced over at them. Mr. Chotos and the grandpa stared in terror at the spellcaster group before us. Only Teru looked at me with her wide, sparkling eyes. "Mr. Nemaki, your eyes are *really* pretty."
Eh? Are you flirting, Teru? Is now really the time?
Ha, this was certainly unexpected. But, you know, she had already dipped her toes in dangerous waters with that marriage proposal when we first met. I shouldn't have been that surprised. Exactly what kind of response could I give that wouldn't harm this passionate lady? Hmm…
I was seriously troubled. Just then, Mr. Chotos spotted the battle-axe sticking out of my sleeve, turned pale, and grabbed my arm. "Hey, Nemaki, you can't fight those spellcasters! We have to run."
"Eh?"
What's wrong, mister? Why's your face so pale? Did you actually think I would throw my weapon at those creeps over there? Come on, my guy. Your best joke is your face, okay? We've been together for like a week now, so you should know I know my own weaknesses.
"It's true that you could probably do something about those spellcasters in front," said Mr. Chotos. "But you definitely can't win against that man in the back. Even I know that golem wielder."

“The man in the back?”
I had been under the impression that the busty lady was this group’s greatest asset. Was I wrong? Indeed, just as Mr. Chotos said, a man wearing a purple Inverness-style robe stood in the back of the spellcaster gang. Was that person a golem wielder like me? To think the first person I met who shared my profession would be a criminal… I was shocked. Appalled!
“Is that guy famous?”
“*Yes*. He’s a renowned elite of the Spellcaster’s Association—the strongest golem wielder in Sadie territory. His name is Ginem Bari.” Mr. Chotos couldn’t look away from him. “He’s a ‘jester golem’ wielder—those are also light-class golems, but they’re even faster than shrine golems. You have to understand how that completely removes your advantage, yes?”
“Sorry, I’m not really getting it…”
“I knew you’d be like this,” Mr. Chotos said with a trembling sigh.
I *did* recall seeing the name “jester golem” in *Illustrated Guide to Golems*. They were indeed faster than those busty shrine golems, so they had to be speedy as heck. I had only skimmed that passage, but were they really so amazing?
“Besides, the problem isn’t that he uses jester golems. That man, Ginem Bari, he’s…”
As I listened to Mr. Chotos, I studied this Ginem fellow. He was lanky, with narrow almond eyes, and he looked to be in his twenties, so he probably wasn’t that much older than me. His wavy navy-blue hair would’ve been unique in my original world, but in this world, it was common. In this respect, his appearance couldn’t really be called gaudy. But, as Mr. Chotos seemed to be trying to imply, he had a different *air* about him.
I see… So this was what a standard golem wielder was like. I really had a feel for it now.
Actually, ever since I’d heightened my senses with sorcery, I had been concerned about something, which is to say, there was something *behind* Ginem Bari. It had quietly lurked there the whole time.
At that moment, I locked eyes with Ginem Bari. The fox-eyed spellcaster grinned and laughed.
“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Wielder of the Red-Eyed Golem. I’ve heard rumors that you’re quite good.” Ginem Bari’s confident smile made it clear he was convinced he would win against me. He opened both arms wide, expanding his purple robe. “First, let’s make some introductions. These guys are my adorable partners.”
The moment Ginem Bari made this announcement, four shadows—two on either side of him—jumped out from behind his flapping robe. These shadows resolved into four eerie, lavender golems.
Mr. Chotos let out a cry. “That man…Ginem Bari… He controls four golems at the same time… He’s a ‘multiple golem wielder’…”

Mr. Chotos’s complexion was getting quite bad. Sweat rolled down his forehead, pulling down his thinning hair. He looked way worse than he had while working beneath the wagon. “How could this be? The Four Jester Wielder Ginem Bari… To prepare such a thorough countermeasure against Nemaki… Could this be the Paisley Company’s doing…?”

Chapter 17:
Training and Reward

THE JESTER GOLEM WIELDER, Ginem Bari, smiled, and his eyes narrowed. I didn’t think we were going to KO this guy in one hit, not like those punks. His strength was palpable as we stood off against each other.
His lavender golems crouched on either side of him. They were peculiarly built, with thin bodies and elongated arms relative to their height. Their basic structure resembled that of a mannequin, though their overall design was far more elaborate. They did somewhat remind me of a kind of clown. Their lavender breastplates perfectly matched each other’s, and they furthermore complemented the purple color scheme of their master, Ginem Bari.

Hm. I liked that idea, honestly. Maybe I could find a white robe to match my Gol.
Ah, but white dirties so easily and it really stands out in a crowd…
Since they were able to hide behind Ginem, these jester golems had small statures. Using Gol as a comparison, the height difference was like that of a female high school student versus four elementary school students.
According to the Monkey-Meter System, which measured an enemy's height and which I had developed specifically for this world, the jester golems were roughly 2.3 monkey-meters tall. In other words, they were as tall as 2.3 small monkeys, which meant that they were slightly larger than a medium monkey and smaller than a large monkey.
For those who need the size based on the meters of my original world, a small monkey would be roughly that of a Japanese macaque. Please do the rest of the conversion based on that unit.
……
Pl-please understand. I can't help it! The number of monkeys I've encountered in this world far exceeds the number of humans. When trying to gauge size instinctively, I can't help but think in terms of monkeys! Monkeys are my only standard…
Anyway, the jester golems were short in stature, so although they left an oddly sharp impression, they didn't seem that strong. I mean, they were li'l. They did appear to be a *kind* of threat, but it was really only because there were four of them.
Mr. Chotos had called Ginem Bari a "multiple golem wielder." I guessed that meant he owned several golems? Big whoop. Gol had won her one-on-six duel against the busty shrine golem death squad. She would have absolutely no problem with a mere four. Of course, these clowns were said to be faster than those well-endowed ladies, so I couldn't be entirely certain.
And…I admit I was a bit worried.
Mr. Chotos seemed especially anxious about this "multiple golem wielder," even though he had already witnessed Gol's combat capabilities that time she instantly destroyed dozens of punks.
"Mister, is a multiple golem wielder that dangerous?"
"A multiple golem wielder exerts complete control over each of their golems. They can manipulate their golems as easily as their own limbs—their own *fingers*. It isn't nearly the same as simply facing four opponents."
Mr. Chotos's explanation was actually pretty clear and thorough. He had developed a pretty solid understanding of my meager knowledge base due to all the conversations we'd had.
But what did he mean by "control" and "manipulate"? My old man sometimes used such nonsensical words. Could it be like the golem version of the commands you gave dogs, such as "shake" and "sit"?

“Listen, Nemaki. If you fight that man, you’ll be killed. Let me go negotiate. Do you understand? Don’t attack them.” As Mr. Chotos gave me this warning, he tightly held my arms back as if I were his stupid, delinquent son who was trying to butt heads with the yakuza.
Then he took a step forward.
Mister, do you really mean to talk to these guys?
He probably assumed there was room for negotiations, since Ginem and his group hadn’t attacked again. Normally, I would’ve done the same. But I had a feeling the only reason the group hadn’t made another move was because they were biding their time. Perhaps they were wary of Gol. They understood that if they carelessly charged us head-on, many of them would fall to Gol’s counterattack, even if they did manage to kill me.
There was a vicious frankness underlying this assessment that felt…brutal. Unlike me. That same instinct had continued to survey the surroundings with my heightened awareness, and through it, I had discovered two facts about our aggressors.
The first fact had been the four things lurking behind Ginem’s back.
The second fact was… I turned to stare at the forest to my right. There were more people out there: two of them. Moreover, one of them was quite large, exceeding three meters tall. They were probably a heavy-class golem. In that case, the other person was their golem wielder.
However, I couldn’t tell the type of golem yet. While I did sense this ambush, the darkness and lingering spell-created mist meant I couldn’t clearly identify them. Whoever had made the mist had likely left this remnant on purpose; they had perhaps chosen to do so when their surprise attack failed. Then the group showed off what they thought was the obviously superior golem wielder, all to divert my attention from the presence still hidden in the mist.
These weren’t haphazard, desperate tactics; these moves were deliberate and calculated.
I didn’t know when the ambush would come. Based on their position—increasingly behind me—they most likely intended to attack simultaneously with the group before us, I think… Or they were waiting for Gol and me to split up.
Well, at least I didn’t think the ambush party could fire off any spells from so far in the woods. They were farther from me than Ginem and his group were—completely out of range for any attack spell.
The firing range of spells in this world was kind of pathetic, honestly. Not only did a spell weaken and scatter over distance, its trajectory couldn’t be altered unless by sorcery. The greater the distance from the target, the lesser the accuracy.
From that perspective, I understood why Earth sorcery was considered so dangerous, since it could make hard objects that would never weaken fly freely through the air across any distance. This was the reason the monkeys’ stone bullets were so feared, despite their bland appearance.

Well, in my case, I couldn't frivolously use sorcery like the wild monkeys and dinosaurs lest my identity be found out and an arrest warrant issued. At any rate, since I knew of the ambush, I could now devise some counter against it.

"Still…" I peered into my robe at the battle-axe dyed that evil black.

Back in the wasteland, when I'd fought for my life against wild animals that thought nothing of using their full power, I hadn't thought of my heightened spatial awareness as anything but a bonus to help me chuck rocks. However, it appeared that against people, this ability afforded a terrifying advantage. If this group had planned a more thorough surprise attack, they might have caught me off guard. *Might* have.

I glanced to my right again, where I found Gol right up against my arm, unwilling to move.

I see. So you also noticed the ambush in the mist.

Was that why she lingered instead of charging, so she could protect me from these uncertain foes? My kindhearted partner was worried about her weak master and couldn't leave him.

Just as I was about to pat Gol's head to comfort her, Mr. Chotos began his negotiation. "Ginem Bari, your business is with me. I have the shop's deed right here!"

Oh? By offering the deed to his shop, Mr. Chotos was playing his ace. For a stingy old man, he was being quite generous.

"I apologize for the disgrace the uproar in Tibar brought to the Company. But, you know, this golem wielder here is simply a bodyguard I hired. He attacked Dazu and his group on my order, and I even forced him to come with me to Zibil, even though he was unwilling. This guy doesn't want any serious trouble with the Company, none at all!" he declared.

"H-hey, mister…?" I said. What was with that excuse? I didn't really get what he was trying to do, but going by his tone, wouldn't they mistake me for some cheap jerk who acted only for the sake of money? Furthermore, did he think my pride would allow me to obediently follow the orders of someone like him? *I refuse to allow you to spew such slanderous gibberish about me. Listen here, hurry up and take it back!*

However, Mr. Chotos ignored my silent glare of protest and continued. "The only person who acted against the Company is me."

Mr. Chotos squeezed his eyes shut and took a short breath. Then he opened his eyes to glare at the spellcasters. "In exchange for the safety of the other three, I'll give you the deed, and I'll have my bodyguard stand down. It's not a bad deal, right? In a fight like this, half of you won't go home at all, unless in pieces. As fellow spellcasters, you must see this man's strength can't be underestimated."

To a degree, Mr. Chotos's expression was ghastly, even menacing. You would never have imagined such a face on the pitiful man who turned pale while being threatened by punks.

Ah, on closer inspection, Mr. Chotos's legs were shaking… But, well, this was a good performance for someone like him. I just had this nagging feeling that Mr. Chotos had resolved himself for something terrible.
"If it's revenge you want, I'll go to the Company with you. After that…I don't care what you do."
Just as I thought. But mister, unfortunately, I don't think the unappealing body of a middle-aged man like yourself has any real worth.
While I was processing my sensible and composed analysis, Mr. Chotos turned to me, his face full of conviction. Then, staring directly into my eyes, he said, "Nemaki…take care of Teru for me."
"Excuse me?" I gaped. What the heck are you saying? You truly are an authentic idiot. Knocked me right off my feet. What kind of person tosses away guardianship and asks a stranger to raise their precious daughter?!
While I exploded internally with *sensible* and *composed* anger, Ginem Bari's shoulders began to shake.
"Pfft, he he." He was laughing. "He he. Oh wow, Mister…um, Mr. Chotos, right? That was a truly admirable show of self-sacrifice. But, you know, you're just crashing our party."
"Wh-what…? What do you mean?"
"Exactly what I said. Mr. Chotos, I'm afraid that you're in no position to negotiate."
Just as I'd thought. These guys had no intention of talking things over and never had. They probably thought they could do whatever they wanted now that they'd pinned me and Gol between the clowns and their lurking ambush.
"Pl-please hear out my request. I'll do whatever you want. So, please, just those three…" Mr. Chotos continued to desperately cling to the possibility of a trade. He really didn't know when to give up. Even when he was half-dead, he had clung to that punk's leg when he attempted to embezzle all the sorcery cores.
Had this man been so persistent when he tried to court the wife from whom Teru had clearly inherited all her genes? Actually, in that case…maybe I needed to devote myself to learning from him?
Just as I was beginning to seriously consider adopting Mr. Chotos's courting techniques, Ginem Bari's eyes moved from Mr. Chotos to me.
"In the first place, Mr. Chotos… Just between the two of us, my client didn't give me any orders about retrieving a deed or securing you. My top priority is to eliminate the wielder of the red-eyed golem over there." Ginem Bari looked at me and snickered. "I guess that means he must have done quite a number on my client."
Eh? Me?!
Well, that could well have been true. My Gol did bite the hell out of those subcontractors the other day. That had been an accident brought forth by my carelessness as her owner, and I was truly sorry. That suspicious,

dashing branch manager hadn't said anything at the office, but I guess he really had been furious on the inside.
"I beg of you. Please think it over. Everything has been my fault. He wouldn't be involved if it weren't for me!" Mr. Chotos cried.
"Well, I'm also here because I'm being paid a great deal of money. Obviously, I'd like to take it seriously. Pfft, he he," Ginem Bari cackled in amusement.
On the other hand, Mr. Chotos was now literally crying.
This man really does cry a lot… You should learn from your Teru's mental fortitude. Look, that little girl isn't crying even now, see?
I turned to check on Teru. She was clinging to me, and although she wasn't crying, she had crouched down, frozen in place. Ah. She was nervous after all.
Well, duh. Of course she would be scared. Her pitiful papa had broken down in tears… However, when Teru noticed I had turned to her, she stared up at me with her big, round eyes.
I was taken aback. This young girl's eyes were unwaveringly bright. Augh. No good. These were the eyes of someone with complete faith. It was as if she were looking at a champion of justice who would never lose.
How could this be? This five-year-old who looked like a three-year-old couldn't conceive of the possibility that I would lose. Ah, was this the reason why she hadn't yet cried?!
Her faith was too heavy. I was being crushed by this innocent child's eyes.
Please wait, Teru. I just mooch off Gol. I'm a mooching Sorcerer King who's only good for refereeing. You must not put your trust in such a useless man!

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I was flustered by the young girl's direct stare, and Mr. Chotos was bawling. This two-man party was on the brink of annihilation.
In any case, it was safe to say that Mr. Chotos's attempt to negotiate with our assailants had ended in complete failure. Well, he was only an old man. I couldn't say I expected much from him.
While Mr. Chotos was negotiating, I had examined Ginem. That was why I hadn't stopped Mr. Chotos, even though I had little hope for his attempt. Though I was sure his words would come to nothing, the time he bought me to assess Ginem was by no means useless. In fact, it yielded several new facts about our enemy.
As Mr. Chotos pleaded his case, Ginem and his group showed no signs of moving. Neither did they show signs of impatience. This group had said they wanted to make this attack look like the work of the Flame Bicorn. In short, while I supposed this was a given, it meant they didn't want their crime to be made public. In that case, however, they should've killed us far earlier. The longer they took to commit their crime, the greater the chance of discovery.

But this group was utterly unbothered. To be fair, not a single person had passed on the road while the Wind flotation box was being repaired. While this wasn't the type of place people and vehicles often passed through, it seemed likely this group had prepared for that eventuality.
I didn't know of any spell to prevent passersby, but if the Paisley Company was supporting this group from behind the scenes, I didn't think it would be difficult for them to shut down a portion of the road. Unfortunately, I had to give up on the strategy of trying to buy time for help to arrive.
Another thing had caught my attention. Once more, I casually glanced at the forest to my right. If anyone was buying time, it was Ginem and his group. While they remained stationary, the large golem and their owner were slowly moving—not behind me, but more directly to the right. They weren't getting closer, but it unsettled me nevertheless.
While maintaining a fixed distance, they had moved a few dozen meters. They were practically directly horizontal to me now. They moved slowly, silently, stifling the least of their noises. But why did they continue to change their position in these seemingly minute, meaningless ways?
In any case, I wanted to avoid fighting them once they got into their preferred position. I needed to start the fight soon, even though I still hadn't had any epiphanies about how to deal with them.
Likewise, as I made use of my sorcerous detection ability, I came to understand its limits. If the ambush party moved any further away, I didn't think I'd be able to sense their movements unless I consciously searched for them. It seemed my accuracy dropped when challenged by things like distance and visibility.
Which is all to say, while this ability diminished the risk of surprise attack, it didn't make me omniscient.
It seemed Gol's detection was far superior to mine, if you took range into account. She could detect a monkey in her blind spot from an absurd distance. On the other hand, if something entered my blind spot, my sorcery radar wouldn't even pick it up.
Conversely, it seemed I was particularly adept at calculating the threat of visible objects, even flying ones, provided they were in an open and unobstructed space. I could precisely tell a bird's position and condition as it flew high in the air.
In other words, if Gol's Surface Detection was a ground sonar, my ability was like an aircraft radar.
Did Gol always see the world like this? I glanced at Gol as she pressed herself close to me. Well, I likely perceived things a bit differently, but that feeling of being able to minutely grasp my surroundings was probably one she knew well.
And yet, even though Gol could read her enemies' movements and was always quick to fight, she stuck close and refused to leave if she thought I was in danger. She really did worry about me.

However, we would only break this deadlock if Gol separated from me and started the fight. I just needed to convince her to do so.
Mr. Chotos was still desperately trying to appeal to Ginem Bari for my life. He really didn't know when to give up.
I plopped my hand on his shoulder. "Mister, it's fine."
"N-Nemaki…?"
"That's enough. You tried. Although what they're doing is surely illegal, they came here under the pretense of fulfilling their duty, so I don't think any amount of persuasion is gonna make them leave."
"N-no, but…" Mr. Chotos looked like he wanted to continue, even so. This persistent desire of his to resolve every problem with words was truly noble. It was the mentality of a cultured man. Compared to every member of the opposing group, who took pride in their violence, I thought Mr. Chotos was far more elegant and—dare I say—cool.
But the time for talking has passed. You don't have to keep pushing yourself, mister.
"It can't be helped. Think of them as wild monkeys incapable of communication and give up," I said.
You know, I'd once thought about becoming friends with the monkeys I encountered in the wasteland, but that had been an empty dream. The monkeys of this world didn't possess the intelligence required to converse with humans. There was no need for Mr. Chotos to go through the same grief at missed connections that I had already suffered.
"Any effort you spend trying to communicate with monkeys of such low intelligence is spent in vain." I emphasized the last few words.
My sorcery told me that veins were bursting in the foreheads of some of the spellcasters, while others' eyebrows twitched in irritation.
Whoa, the arrogant busty lady looks like she's gonna bite me. That's kind of scary.
I lowered my voice and whispered to Mr. Chotos. "Hey, mister, take your daughter and the driver and move to the left and behind me. Do it slowly, and as naturally as possible. Once you've moved, huddle and stick close to me."
"Wh-why?"
"If you don't want to die, please do as I say."
Ginem Bari had said before that I was his priority. However, I couldn't take him at face value. In the first place, he hadn't explicitly said he wouldn't kill the other three once he was done with me. Also, there was no way a group of criminals who planned to use a Flame Bicorn as a cover-up would let any witnesses live. In the end, I still had to protect these three.
There was also the ambush stationed in the forest to my right. If it made its move before I could move my group to the left, there wouldn't be much I could do with my level of athleticism. In other words, getting them behind me so I could act as their shield was our best option. Finally, I asked them to move naturally so as not to alert the ambush party. The last thing I

needed was for Team Ambush to see what I had in mind and lose us the advantage.
“Nemaki…” Mr. Chotos had noticed something off as my tone was unusually forceful. He remained silent the whole time he shifted to my left.
Now I would have to take the full brunt of any attack. This wasn’t a particularly strange position, I thought. It just looked like I was being a responsible bodyguard-for-hire.
I monitored the movement of my party with my heightened senses and waited for them to get into position. Now I just had to convince Gol to act.
I whispered into Gol’s ear, “I noticed the ambush to our right, too. It’s fine. Even if they attack us, I’m sure I can handle them myself.” I showed her a glimpse of the *Earth Battle-Axe* in my sleeve. *So, Gol, I need you to wipe out the enemies in front of us.*
Gol was clever, so I was confident she would understand. In the worst-case scenario, where my true identity was revealed and I had to use a sorcery attack, even a peaceful, cultured man like me could probably at least buy some time for Gol to defeat the enemy and return.
While that might have been the case, I didn’t think my abilities could do much to the enemy’s heavy-class golem. After all, *NTR* had practically no effect on golems. Even my sorcery attacks hadn’t been able to scratch the main body of the ancient Earth Dragon, despite all those shots I rained down on it. All told, I was less than reliable.
But if I worked hard and kept focused, I figured I should be able to at least provide some support—like perhaps tripping the heavy golem. I would perform to the best of my abilities with the cards dealt to me.
I also hoped a huge golem wouldn’t be able to run fast or well through the forest. A slow golem would give me more time to adjust my plan before it reached us.
“You got it, Gol?”
Gol wavered, hesitant. She was so worried about me that she didn’t want to leave. She had been like this since our first encounter with the monkeys.
“It’s fine. Trust me,” I said as I stared directly into Gol’s eyes.
Gol remained conflicted. Her eyes flickered restlessly. It appeared her desire to grant my request wrestled with her desire to not separate from me.
No? Was it no good? Normally, this would be the emotional scene where I gave her the determination to fight… However, I really did understand her feelings. I had a damning track record.
“Relax. I’m your partner, right?” I spoke in the most gallant and honest tone I could muster.
Gol looked delighted as she stared at me. But her eyes also wavered, and she clung to my sleeve. She showed absolutely no signs of leaving.
That was strange. I would’ve thought that by now our friendship and mutual trust would have been reaffirmed and the fight would start. Anyway, I wouldn’t be discouraged; I continued my attempt to persuade her.

“Hey, have you forgotten, partner? I’m the man who defeated a dragon, remember?”
Well, now that I thought about it, that win might have been a fluke of beginner’s luck. Furthermore, at the time, I had become strangely furious and lost myself. If I were told to defeat the ancient Earth Dragon the same way again, I would declare it 100 percent impossible.
However, Gol unexpectedly accepted this statement. For a moment, she seemed to agree with me.
Oh? Did that work?
I had high hopes, but it seemed Gol immediately reconsidered and grabbed my sleeve again. Augh, it really was no good. Even I didn’t think I had been very persuasive just then. This was bad. My usual uselessness and Gol’s overprotectiveness made it extremely difficult to progress.
“It’s really all right, Gol. Just relax, okay? Can you trust me? If I think it’s dangerous, I’ll, um, make sure to run away…”
Gol heard my request, but her eyes couldn’t focus due to all her distress and conflicting feelings. In fact, her eyes were turning blue, like she was crying. The white hand grabbing my robe began to tremble. It didn’t seem like she would ever let go now.
What could I do? This was an utterly different development from what I’d expected. Perhaps I had misread Gol’s overprotectiveness. Far from dramatically and efficiently persuading my partner, the more I talked, the more I triggered Gol’s maternal instincts, further bogging down the situation.
At this rate, it was going to get bad.
I steeled myself. If possible, I didn’t want to use this move, since it wasn’t a very good method for training. But human lives were on the line. I had no more options. This was my last resort.
I softly whispered in Gol’s ear: “If you do well, I’ll wipe all over your body tonight as a reward.”
Gol’s beautiful profile slowly and quietly turned to face our enemies. Her crimson eyes burned with the fierce, scarlet flame of war, and her angelic, snow-white limbs shone with the weight of divinity as an intense pressure rolled off her entire body. Her majestic appearance resembled that of an alabaster war goddess descending to the battlefield.
Yeah, so… I knew this from my experience with owning a dog. Dogs will throw away every last drop of pride for the right reward.
Gol took a powerful step forward, and each step that followed overflowed with clarion determination.
“Don’t kill them,” I said, just in case. “We need them as witnesses to the crimes of the Paisley Company.”
It didn’t seem like she heard me as she moved in front of me, light and graceful as the breeze.
Hmm…I wonder if she really understood.

This marked the end of a difficult meeting with my partner. At last, the curtain rose on the battle against the Four Jester Wielder, Ginem Bari.

Chapter 18:
Jesters' Chains and Destructive Witch

GOL ADVANCED on the enemy.
"The shrine golem is moving!"
The front row of spellcasters simultaneously stood ready with tense faces. Meanwhile, Ginem Bari didn't move at all, keeping that smile on his face.
"Looks like they're finally ready. Great. If you didn't get into it, it'd be boring."
As if Ginem's words were the signal, the four jester golems scattered forward.
"Now then, Mr. Wielder of the Red-Eyed Golem. I wonder if you're really as strong as the rumors say. Don't go disappointing me, okay?"
The four jester golems fanned out to face Gol, while the spellcaster group remained in the back, and Ginem Bari assumed his lonely position farthest away.
Since there were multiple enemies to watch, Gol didn't start the fight with a one-on-one frontal assault. She continued to stalk forward in a menacing way that kept all her enemies on high alert.
Unfortunately, Gol also kept glancing back. I exchanged something like, I don't know, a hundred glances with my anxious partner.
You're oozing regret, aren't you? What the heck happened to all that resolve three seconds ago?!
In any case, for now, a good distance separated me from the spellcasters, and I'd been thinking about that. Once, Master Speria had shot a Fire attack spell at a large monkey to teach me a lesson, but he'd needed the monkey to come relatively close—and right now, we stood farther apart than he had stood from the monkey.
At that time, Master Speria had been in danger of a counterattack, although I was sure he had cast his spell from the safest distance possible. Also, the strength of the spell hadn't mattered, as none could have defeated the monkey, and furthermore, since he was an amazing person who could use ten different attributes, he would have had plenty of choices.
Given all that, I suspected the Fire spell he used at that moment had been chosen not for power but for range—
possibly, it had possessed a longer range than most attack spells, possibly even the longest.
If I assumed most spells fell into a sort of mid-range between Master Speria's Fire spell and direct contact, then the enemies' battle formation made perfect sense. So long as we maintained this distance, neither of us could hit each other with spells. For now, the battle would be a fistfight between our golems, with our spells acting in support. Once one side's golem(s) had fallen, the last golem standing would charge the enemy

spellcasters. That moment would determine the outcome of the fight—and who got to live.
If our enemy hadn't had a golem wielder with them, I might have been able to trample them in a one-sided massacre while I remained at a comfortable distance. This supported the claim in *Introduction to Spellcrafting* that golem wielders had a distinct advantage in spellcaster vs. spellcaster battles.
However, my brilliant deduction had one huge hole in it: that surprise fireball someone had shot at me in the beginning. That shot had come flying out from the mist from somewhere far away. If one of the spellcasters fired another one from where they were currently standing, it would definitely reach me.
That was the only thing I couldn't explain. It was our enemies' trump card. That one shot seemed to have had almost twice the range of Master Speria's Fire spell. But if that was true, the enemy's formation made no sense. However, I *had* been shot at…
Suffice to say, this situation was impossible to explain. That fireball from the mist was the one piece that didn't fit the puzzle, an irregular phenomenon that subverted my otherwise sound thesis. Which meant I couldn't see the full picture.
"Hey, mister, can our spells reach each other from this distance?" I whispered to Mr. Chotos, only mildly ashamed that my inner kindergartener was showing.
"Normally, no. We're twice the distance away from the maximum range of any attack spell."
"Yeah, I thought so. But, then again, that one Fire spell came flying at us from quite far away."
Mr. Chotos threw a glance at the buxom spellcaster in the front line. "Look at that woman."
"You mean that one whose outfit is needlessly lewd?"
"Yeah. See how she's the only spellcaster holding a long staff?"
"Yes, I do." I was actually pretty interested in her uniquely shaped crimson staff. It was terribly flashy and totally befitting of a spellcaster. But, unexpectedly, she was the only one in the group holding anything like it.
"That staff's a mana tool. It extends the range of specific spells. Still, there are limits to the range of attack-type spells, and the mana consumption of that tool is magnitudes higher than just casting the spell on its own. If you cast an advanced-level spell with it, you'll have to rest for quite a while."
"So in other words, it's a weapon designed to end combat in a single surprise attack…?"
"Correct."
I see… So that red staff was their linchpin. Was it like a sniper rifle?
Moreover, this mini-lecture was just the sort of thing I'd come to expect from the owner of a mana tool shop. He was truly knowledgeable. Because of him, the mystery had been solved.

In any case, even if there was a mana tool that could extend the range of a spell, it couldn't be relied on forever. I also no longer really needed to worry about the possibility that the ambush party would cast an attack spell. Even if they fired arrows that managed to reach me, I was confident in my ability to deflect that kind of attack with the sorcery-controlled *Earth Battle-Axe*.
In other words, if I left the destruction of most of the enemy group to Gol, I just needed to focus on protecting the three beside me from 1) the possibility that the female spellcaster still had enough mana left to fire another long-range attack, and 2) the possibility that the mysterious heavy-class golem in the ambush party would attack our flank.
If the female spellcaster shot another giant fireball, I could attempt to intercept it with the axe. According to a description in *Introduction to Spellcasting*, two opposing spells of the same power negated each other. While I didn't know if my *Earth Battle-Axe* would completely extinguish her flame, it would at least dampen some of its power. This was, in fact, one of the reasons I had created the battle-axe. I'd never performed such a maneuver, however, and if possible, I didn't want to try it without proof that it actually worked.
On the other hand, if the heavy-class golem attacked, I would be compelled to do something to hold it off until Gol returned. I worried I might end up accidentally revealing my sorcery, but my criminal record was nothing against the importance of children and the elderly.
All right. I had my reason to fight and I had my strategy.
While I considered the movements of the enemy group, Gol slowly closed the distance on the enemy's front line. At last, she stepped into the range of the enemies' spells.
The first ones to move were the enemy spellcasters. They held out their hands toward Gol and began to chant in unison.
"BLAZING FLAME BULLET."
"PIERCING WIND BULLET."
Fire and Wind particles gathered in their extended hands, then a volley of blazing fire bullets and balls of swirling whirlwinds shot forward. They flew toward Gol and hit her one after the other.
What explosive flames! Did the combination of the Fire and Wind spells increase their destructive power?
I was worried for my partner, but I soon realized there was nothing to fear. Gol remained nonchalant, not bothering to dodge or block any of the attacks. She paid no mind to the fact that her body was bathed in fire and wind, ignoring the absurd flood as she inexorably advanced.
Even the Japan Self-Defense Forces tanks helplessly firing volleys at an SFX monster in a kaiju movie felt more effective than the spellcasters' efforts here. Right before each spell hit Gol, it diffused and disappeared. I had witnessed this phenomenon during Master Speria's demonstration with the large monkey.

This was a golem's classic defense against spells: the secondary effect of the mana circulation flowing inside their body. From what I could tell, Gol's defenses far surpassed the monkeys'. When that monkey had been hit with the Fire spell, residual flames had left a heat haze in its surroundings, but Gol left no such trail. The spells that hit her were completely nullified.
It reminded me of when she took the brunt of the fireball from the initial surprise attack. It had felt strange that she wasn't remotely warm afterward. No doubt the same phenomenon was at work here.
But that was weird, right? Unlike an amateur golem wielder like myself, Ginem and the rest of the spellcasters had to know attack spells wouldn't work against a golem. So why were they firing off a wave of such useless attacks?
"I-It's taken a full volley of rapid-fire advanced-level Wind spells, yet its movements haven't even slowed…!"
"I don't believe it. What's with this golem? The amount of mana it's circulating must be stupid huge."
"To think our attacks couldn't stop a light-class golem… I-I've lost my confidence as a spellcaster…"
Ah, the spellcasters all moaned with pale faces. Was the revelation that their spells had been so ineffective so unexpected…?
Hm? Wait a sec. Was that whirlwind just now an advanced-level Wind spell?!
I believed the Wind spell Master Speria had cast against the ancient Earth Dragon to save me had been called *Storm Cannon*, and it had been far more impressive than what these guys were throwing. Power, scope, you name it—it topped them by every measure. Honestly, I was sure even Gol would be blown away if she took a direct hit from such a powerful spell. It was probably the strongest of all the advanced-level options. Master Speria really was amazing. As expected of my master…
Uninterested in my fantasies of a master-disciple relationship, the spellcasters continued to attack. Although they were ineffective against Gol, it was kind of intense to watch the explosive flames of the Fire spells, fanned by the Wind spells, being continually repelled. In particular, the flame bullets shot by that female spellcaster were conspicuously fierce.
"I guess we should watch her carefully." I kept my eye on her. For the time being, she didn't show any signs of using her staff-shaped mana tool, instead letting it hang by her waist as she held her hand out toward Gol and cast Fire spells.
Still, this kind of woman was definitely supposed to be an ally—or even harem member—of the protagonist in an isekai story. She was beautiful and busty, and her outfit showed a ton of skin. Why did she have to be an enemy? This was painful.
I couldn't believe I kept encountering such scummy people in this world: punks, criminals, rotten staff members of an evil company, even this beauty. Why did it have to be like this? The gods were too cruel.

Actually, the more I looked at the female spellcaster, the more excessively huge her bosom seemed. What exactly did she eat to make it so bombastic? Every time she fired a spell, those two large balloons jiggled and shook.
Ah, I-I feel that this might be a bit too obscene…
In my negligence, I ended up unconsciously eyeballing the rocking fruits of the female spellcaster. I was a simple human. I couldn't help it. Worse, this extremely frank and brief expression slipped out of my mouth: "H-huge…"
At that moment, Gol, who had been cautiously advancing towards the enemy, suddenly rushed recklessly forward for some reason.
"Huh?!"
What's happening? What's wrong, partner?!
Even though moments ago she had been glancing over her shoulder and behaving so cautiously, now she acted like all the blood had rushed to her head. I was taken aback by her sudden change in strategies. However, her inexplicable rush was thwarted before she could reach the enemy.
In unison, the four jester golems commenced their attack. In fact, it seemed they had darted about, hiding within the barrage of spells, and had been carefully surrounding Gol for some time already.
I realized now that this was probably the spellcasters' true objective. The relentless ineffective attacks were a camouflage for the jester golems.
As the jesters circled Gol at high speed, they suddenly produced stone daggers in their hands and began to pummel Gol in a storm of slashes. Pale sparks flew with each flash of the sharp blades.
Thanks to my heightened spatial awareness, I had already detected these hidden daggers. Of course, that meant Gol knew about them as well.
Each of the jester golems was cleverly outfitted with four daggers on their back. However, since this information hadn't been recorded in the illustrated guidebook, they were probably additional equipment Ginem Bari had given them. If they faced an opponent who was unaware of their daggers, they could probably abruptly decapitate their enemy and quickly end the battle.
Gol, however, was unharmed. She dodged the jester golems' flurry of attacks without getting hit.
So, about her dodging… I had noticed something back when she fought the shrine golems. The busty ladies' naginatas had been much stronger power-wise than the clowns' daggers, but Gol had stopped their initial swings with her neck. Yet she didn't stoically take every attack they threw at her, either. Some she would dodge, and some she would withstand.
By what criteria did she decide to defend or evade? I didn't think it was determined based on target location. She had taken attacks to her head and chest, which were her vitals and, of course, always came out unscathed. Even so, just watching her take those blows made me break out into a cold sweat.
In any case, there was no doubt that Gol boasted an absurdly high defensive capability compared to a normal light-class golem. I didn't miss Ginem

Bari’s momentary frozen look when Gol brushed off a direct hit from the clowns’ daggers.
However, these clowns were also terribly quick and horrifically strong. I mean, Gol was actually having trouble attacking them. I feared it was partly that they didn’t have her full concentration because she kept checking on me, but nevertheless, these were dangerous enemies.
The clown brigade leapt in all directions at high speeds. Whenever Gol attempted to punch one, the remaining three simultaneously threw themselves at her, which forced her to dodge. This effectively circumvented her ability to unleash her sure-fire killer punch.
It really did feel like each golem was a dexterous, clever finger on the same giant hand. Ginem Bari sure was skilled at the golem-fighting game. He was like a professional gamer who had dropped in at an arcade to challenge me, the trash beginner.
While Gol struggled to best the clowns’ fierce strategy, I probed the situation in the forest. Though the battle had begun and Gol had left my side, the heavy-class golem still didn’t show any signs of approaching. Were they backup, or were they actually just observers?
I only became more suspicious, but Ginem Bari was having the time of his life. “Your golem is phenomenal. Its strength is undeniable, and its mobility surpasses anything I’ve seen. To think I would encounter someone who could hold off my golems for so long.”
Ginem’s narrow eyes narrowed even further, as if he were trying to understand something about me. “Moreover, its defenses are abnormally high, given its apparent base. Did you concentrate its mana circulation to create a physical barrier? I’ve heard stories, but I’ve never actually seen it done.”
“Hm…? Hmph, well, now you have.” I pretended I knew what he was talking about. My partner was doing her best to fend off her fellow golems, so I couldn’t cower and lose this debate with their owner. I needed to stand tall as a golem wielder, lest I embarrass my partner.
“Hmm, I see. You didn’t equip it with any armor as a show of confidence in its abilities… I suppose that would make sense if you had such trust in the fortitude of the barrier you devised,” Ginem said.
“Hmph, of course,” I said with a triumphant look, perhaps a dash of arrogance as well. I didn’t exactly know what he meant, but I knew this delightful man was complimenting my adorable partner. Like a simpleton, I let Ginem Bari score some affection points.
Then he said something quite unexpected. “To tell you the truth, I planned to have one of my jesters slip through an opening and dispose of you… But your golem doesn’t have any openings at all, eh?”
He was going to make such an underhanded move? How scary! Affection points rescinded!
I realized then that this was probably what made a multiple golem wielder so fearsome. Unlike me, who only had Gol to rely on, Ginem had a much

wider range of options. Having more tools at your disposal inevitably expands your tactical repertoire.
However, it did seem like Gol was keeping the enemy at bay, preventing them from reaching me. This compelled me to praise her—I had to, as her owner. “Hmph, well, my very good girl, Gol, would never give you any such openings.”
“G-good girl…?” Ginem Bari looked confused, but he soon resumed his usual smirk. “Well, whatever. I wonder how long you can last. The moment that barrier you trust so much breaks will be your last.”
The delicate blue-haired man and I glared at each other.
A second later, the stalemate fractured. At last, Gol held one of the clown’s heads in her fearsome clawhold.
At first my vulnerability had distracted Gol, but it seemed the clowns’ persistence had finally irritated her enough to focus up. By and large, she was a kind and patient girl, but for some reason, she could be quite short-tempered when dealing with anyone but me.
“Tsk,” Ginem Bari clicked his tongue. As he did, the three remaining clowns charged Gol in an attempt to tear their captured comrade away.
In response, Gol unleashed a controlled roundhouse kick. The outrageous force of her lashing white leg created a whirlwind, and her enemies were pushed back by the tremendous wind pressure surrounding her. She eyed them calmly, then ripped through the captured clown’s neck with all her might, tearing its head from its body as easily as I could tear paper.
“Wha—?” Ginem Bari’s eyes widened in astonishment.
Head gone, the clown’s body ceased functioning and fell limp. The beautiful elf goddess with burning eyes tossed the clown’s head to the ground as if discarding a broken toy. She was once again the white witch of destruction.
Next, Gol cracked the armor from the clown’s body, which separated neatly in two. It appeared their stone armor was composed of both a chest piece and backplate. But what exactly was she planning to do with that dismantled armor?
Gol hurled each armor plate and the clown’s body one after the other. The body and armor careened forward at a frightful speed until three purple hunks of stone crashed into the dense crowd of spellcasters, knocking them all down in one go like bowling pins.
The female spellcaster tumbled dramatically away and her red staff snapped. The impact of the spellcasters’ landing covered the battlefield in a plume of dust. The force of Gol’s natural power partially accounted for that giant cloud, but the rest was due to the profound weight of the stone armor.
When the dust cleared, there were no other words to describe the scene but “a clean sweep.” The spellcasters buried in the dirt lay bloodied, motionless, annihilated. Pained groans and cries rose up from the mass. Every one of them was severely injured, but a majority were still conscious. However, it was probably safe to say that the spellcasters meant to support the golems had been rendered powerless.

You see, in order to cast a spell, you don't just have to chant the proper incantation—you have to construct a mental image. It takes a great deal of concentration. This is likely easier for some people than others, but I doubted it was possible for anyone to effectively cast spells while suffering from such grievous injuries and outlandish amounts of pain, especially when dealing with things like broken bones.

Honestly, the outcome of this situation reminded me of nothing more than a hand-to-hand fight. Maybe in a game you can fight at full strength right up to the moment your hit points have been exhausted, but in real life, humans are steadily weakened by the harm they endure. As a weak man myself, I would certainly be useless the moment I was hurt.

Ginem Bari stood staring at the decimated gang of spellcasters. The purple-robed golem wielder had been just out of range of Gol's barrage, and his expression was stiff with fear.

At that moment, Gol seemed to realize she had missed Ginem. She scooped up the clown head she had tossed aside and chucked it with full force.

But instead of hitting Ginem, the clown's head slammed into the busty spellcaster, who was groaning on the ground. Blood sprayed from her nose as she fainted.

Wait, her?! Why?! Why did you aim for Tits McGee, Gol? What's your strategy here?

True, that woman had the staff mana tool, and of all the spellcasters, she was likely the most dangerous. But she was already on the verge of death, and her staff had been broken. If Gol had pitched at Ginem Bari instead, we could've ended the game!

No, wait… Now that I thought about it, it was possible, even likely, that Ginem Bari had a countermeasure against being targeted in just such a way. That had to be rule number one for a proper golem wielder. Maybe I was missing something, but I didn't think that explained attacking a dying busty lady.

Ginem Bari was stuck in a daze as he stared between his obliterated gang and the remains of his jester golem. "H-how? How could this have happened…? No one's ever suspended my golem's basic functions—not since I was a novice."

It seemed this man hadn't experienced loss for a long time. I guessed he really was the kind of gamer who preyed on beginners in arcades.

"Hmph. In this case, you should thank me for showing you how much you still have to learn," I said nonchalantly. Ginem Bari, mend your ways and enjoy training with gamers on your level. Ah, wait, before that, I need you to be judged by the law and pay for your crimes behind bars. You can return to the arcade once you're discharged.

"Pfft, he he… You're really an interesting fellow." Ginem Bari put his hand to his forehead and began to laugh. "How amusing. Truly amusing! To tell you the truth, I wasn't really interested in taking this job, but I'm glad I did. Now I get to fight a *real* battle!"

Ginem Bari laughed and laughed. For a moment, his narrow eyes opened wide. “No holding back. Now that it’s come to this, I can’t be lazy, either. Well, shall we finally settle this? Wielder of the Red-Eyed Golem?”
The remaining three jester golems charged Gol. As usual, the clowns’ dexterity with their daggers was thrilling to see. I had thought losing one of their own would leave a gaping hole in their formation and cripple their efficacy, but that wasn’t the case at all. How can I put it? It felt like their movements had grown immaculately sharp. In no way did their fighting strength diminish without their fourth.
However, Gol had already learned the clowns’ maneuvers. When one got too close, Gol instantly countered with a lightning-quick fist. She grazed her opponent’s shoulder, but with the force of a cannonball. A dull sound echoed as it passed by, leaving a gaping crater in the clown’s shoulder. Cracks fractured out from the wound and part of its body shattered, flinging purple fragments into the air.
Then Gol got serious. It wouldn’t take much longer for this fight to end. Ginem’s clowns walked a tightrope as they deployed their trivial diversions while barely managing to avoid Gol’s attacks. In contrast, Gol’s monstrous punches packed such power that she only ever needed to hit any of them once. One hit, instant death.
If another clown fell, their coordination advantage would vanish. I was sure of it. Then Gol’s attacks would connect unhampered. It would mark the beginning of a massacre.
Just then, the three clowns leapt back out of range and two of them threw their stone daggers at Gol.
Four daggers flew so swiftly you could hear them slicing through the air. Gol twisted her upper body, dodging the first, second, and third shots. The final fourth shot, she slapped away with the palm of her hand. Amazing! She was just like a martial arts master.
Of the three enemies, two were now empty-handed. Nevertheless, this didn’t much impact the situation. Each clown had four daggers strapped to their backs, which meant each of them had at least two more daggers remaining.
Had they meant to launch a surprise attack, thinking we wouldn’t expect a projectile assault and we’d be caught off guard? I warily watched the clowns and noticed a strange movement in their arms. It was faint, but the joints in their forearms shifted. If I hadn’t activated my sorcery, I probably wouldn’t have seen it at all.
Moreover, something was rattling inside their limbs, almost like some kind of machine.
“What’s up with them? Their arms are moving strangely…”
Mr. Chotos heard me and was startled. “What? Their arms?! N-no good!”
Oh, yeah, you’ve been next to me this whole time, mister. You haven’t been talking and your presence is so meek that I forgot all about you. Ah, but I

did tell you that if you didn't want to die, you would need to stay still. Sorry for calling you meek, mister.

"Nemaki, that's probably the jester golems' trick arms at work!"

"Trick arms?" I remembered something like those being described in the illustrated guidebook. A trick arm… What exactly did that mean? Ah, right. A jester golem's arm could detach. I had been under the impression it was a whimsical sort of weapon, but given Mr. Chotos's terror, it seemed to be genuinely dangerous.

Well, that wasn't good. I had to warn Gol. "Hey, Gol, be careful! Their arms —"

I realized then that I hadn't yet called out to Gol during this long battle. I had only spoken to Ginem Bari, and I had more or less ignored my partner. Gol was working so hard all by herself, fighting to the bitter end without any support. I was sure she felt lonely, thinking I had forgotten about her. I had been negligent in my professional duty.

When I called her name, Gol turned in delight to look at me, her long ears fluttering and her gem-like eyes glittering, as if she had been waiting for this for ages.

Ah, wait, no, not that! Face forward! Forward!

Just as I feared, the moment Gol carelessly glanced away, the mechanism in the two jester golems' arms activated. Their forearms detached at the elbow joint and launched like a rocket punch. Each forearm flew through the air, connected to the main body by a sort of long chain.

Four arms and four chains whirled around Gol as she turned. In the blink of an eye, Gol's entire body was entangled.

H-how could this be? Because of me, we're suddenly in a real bind…

Chapter 19:
Jesters' Chains and Immobile Ambush

"HE HE. HEE HEE... I won!" Ginem Bari raised his fist in the air, overjoyed. "I won. I beat you!"
The chains unleashed by the jester golems had restrained Gol's entire body. They bound the youthful elf's slim form like slithering snakes, causing her, um, lovely breasts to swell.
Outlining the smooth curves of her hips.
Accenting her white, seductive thighs.
Each time she weakly struggled, the chains slowly, alluringly, and lewdly tightened as if licking the fair skin of a helpless maiden.
This is absolutely, positively, an utterly depraved sight. I definitely don't think this is appropriate viewing for children.
"H-hey, mister. Teru—"
"I-I'm already on it..." Mr. Chotos had covered Teru's eyes with his hands.
Nice job, mister! This has to be the best work you've done all day!
"Papa, what is it? Aw, Teru wants to see, too!"
I'm sorry, Teru. This fierce battle is far too provocative for you.
Unfortunately, while I was concerned about both Gol's modesty and the state of children's education, I still had to keep an eye out for any signs of the ambush waiting in the forest to my right.

Even though this was the perfect chance to attack now that Gol was ensnared, the heavy-class golem hadn't moved.
I could kind of see why. I suspected the ambush had realized I was aware of them. The heavy-class golem and its wielder had been moving slowly until they suddenly stopped at some point and simply…held their breath. Moreover, they'd paused after I had Mr. Chotos and the others move to my left. I didn't think they had made any suspicious moves since. Rather, although I thought I had directed everyone to move naturally, the ambush had sensed my intentions from the simple fact that we changed positions. This unidentified enemy had fantastic intuition.
Yet even though they had lost the advantage of a surprise attack, I couldn't identify their exact location unless they revealed themselves. In any case, they didn't seem to be planning to withdraw or hide.
Well, that was to be expected. They had no idea just what me and my spatial awareness were capable of. They might have assumed I detected the possibility of an ambush from the lingering remains of the mist-like anti-detection spell, rather than my seeing through it. As such, they thought they could stay still and assume I was unable to pinpoint their location.
But did they intend to continue to stay, or were they just waiting for the opportune moment? I really didn't think they would get a better chance than this one.
In that case, did they really intend to hide until the very end? If I could, I *would* very much like to avoid having any confrontation with a heavy-class golem, so in my heart, I really hoped they would cleave to the "remain hidden" tactic.
Seemingly unaware of the behind-the-scenes mind games between me and the ambush party, Ginem Bari grinned in triumph. "Not even a military-grade shield golem can break the 'jester chain'! You let your guard down, shrine golem wielder."
"Ehhh?! Those chains are that terrifying?" I exclaimed.
The clowns' chains didn't look all *that* tough. Moreover, because the restrained Gol kept bashfully glancing at me, I couldn't shake the impression that they were a certain kind of, ah, *indecent* chain.
Wh-what should I do?
On top of the damn mind games with the ambush, I was growing increasingly concerned for Gol.
"Well, it's about time," Ginem Bari said. As he did, the chains began to tighten and constrict, squeezing Gol ever more. This jester chain was far stronger and more brutal than its appearance suggested. Ginem Bari grinned even more broadly. "You've caused quite a lot of trouble for us. This is the end, red-eyed shrine golem!"
With this shout, one jester golem brandished its dagger and dove through the air like a bird of prey at the immobile, defenseless Gol. It was the one

that had held back from the dagger-throwing and chain-shooting, and this attack was the reason why. This guy would deliver the final blow.
“Gol!” I screamed.
As if in response to my cry, Gol lurched and took a heavy step forward, her body still bound in chains. With her tremendous power, she dragged the jester golems attached to them.
“Ha! Unbelievable, phenomenal! But there’s no point!” Ginem howled.
The jester golem in the air drove both daggers down nigh simultaneously, but with the slightest time differential. One blade aimed to hit Gol’s flank, the other, the pattern on her forehead.
I had a terrible feeling. The clown’s subtle, focused movements and Ginem Bari’s confident leer, certain of his victory… Could these blades actually pierce Gol’s skin?
The corners of Ginem’s mouth curled up as I gasped. The jester golem’s stone daggers hit Gol’s body.
At that moment, Gol violently brandished her head. Her monstrous headbutt smashed forward, and her adamantine forehead sunk into the clown’s skull, shattering it to pieces in a single blow.
Head destroyed, the clown’s body crashed to the earth with the remaining momentum, bouncing off the ground and tumbling as it scattered shards.
“Wh-wh-what…?!” Ginem Bari stared in surprise, speechless. That expression was soon colored with further shock.
Gol spread her arms, shoving away the chains that bound her. Her brute strength rivaled that of her bindings. She paused for a moment, then flung her arms out with all her might, shattering the chains with both arms. Broken fragments danced through the air.
Wh-what gorilla-like strength…!
Splinters of broken chain glittered around Gol like some kind of special effect, making her look exactly like a divine, glowing angel.
With their chains suddenly snapped, the two remaining jester golems lost their balance and staggered. Gol didn’t overlook the chance. Her two white arms swiped for them simultaneously, and each hand grasped one of the two clowns. She lifted her captives in twin clawholds.
This was the same move she had used against the shrine golems. It was a move to demonstrate she had the leeway to be extravagant, and that she surpassed her enemy in every imaginable way. The clowns, lifted by their clutched heads, looked like pitiful prisoners waiting to be hung by the neck until dead.
Gol threw her two enemies into the ground. An explosion of destruction resounded through the meadow. Their purple bodies burst into shards, their heads completely demolished, and their bodies absolutely motionless.
Gol slowly stood. The pristine elf goddess calmly surveyed the battlefield. The headless remains of three clowns lay in pieces at her feet. Never showing anything but the greatest restraint, Gol had slaughtered three enemies at practically the same time. As usual, her strength defied sense.

She glanced at the remains before turning to face Ginem Bari behind her. The defeat of a golem determined the outcome of its wielder.
In one smooth motion, Gol charged the paralyzed Ginem Bari. Her fearsome speed turned the white goddess into a bullet. Her crimson eyes burned as if she were high on bloodlust, and she swung her right arm. The moment of her victory was assured.
Yet the look on Ginem's face filled me with an indescribable discomfort. His wide eyes were directed not at Gol's terrifying approach, but, for some reason, at me.
These were not the eyes of defeat.
Why? Did this man think he hadn't lost? Did he possibly have some way to defeat Gol? No, it couldn't be.
Every detail of every movement was available to me through my heightened senses. Gol's high-speed fist was already on course. Ginem Bari had no time to dodge, guard, or even cast a spell.
So why did Ginem Bari look like he had won?
Or was he feeling something different?
Then it dawned on me. This was the look of a man who had met his equal: frustration mixed with a kind of resignation, and a strange sense of full satisfaction.
It felt like he was saying I would get my comeuppance. Like he was saying… yes…like he thought this was a *draw*. He thought we had reached a tie. But if that was true…
Ginem Bari's defeat was inevitable, but he didn't think our draw equaled Gol's defeat. No, the one he thought would meet a defeat equal to his own was me.
The memory of the ambush party flashed like lightning in my head.
The moment I believed my victory complete was my most thoughtless. Gol and I had never been further apart than we now were. Was this what Ginem Bari had been aiming for?
But I had never once taken my eyes off the ambush. Even now, the heavy-class golem hadn't taken a single step forward—
At that moment, I sensed an enormous object being shot from my right.

Chapter 20:
Jesters' Chains and One Fatal Hit

A GIANT STAKE flew out from the forest at devastating speed.

What was it? Was it…a giant stone arrow? It would be more accurate to call it a battering ram.

At two meters long and fifty centimeters in diameter, it wasn't anything like my *Earth Spear*. It was bigger than a telephone pole. At that horrifying size, you might as well have called it a missile.

Had it been fired by that unidentified heavy-class golem hiding in the forest?

My thoughts accelerated at unbelievable speed. A heavy-class golem… An "arrow" that could be deployed in a castle siege… That guy was a "crossbow golem"!

The crossbow golem was the military-grade, heavy-class golem capable of shooting described in my book.

But there was no way, right? How could it shoot from such a distance?

I had fallen through a gaping hole in my spotty knowledge of golems. I had assumed the hidden heavy-class golem would attack with a melee assault. After all, the book said that crossbow golems had short range and low accuracy. To me, that had implied a single crossbow golem alone was of hardly any use; only an army of them could be effectively deployed in siege tactics. I had never imagined one could be used from a distance like a sniper, and had ruled out such a possibility from the very beginning, especially after dismissing spells for their likewise limited range.

Yet this unexpected stone arrow was coming right at me.

If the golem had fired a normal-sized stone arrow, I could've used my sorcery-controlled *Earth Battle-Axe* to knock it down. But this missile was far too large.

Furthermore, my *NTR* was useless. This giant stone didn't give me that necessary feeling of activation potential. It had been the same with the Fire and Wind spells earlier. It was rapidly becoming clear to me that *NTR* was only really applicable to Earth spells and opposing sorcery; it was otherwise ineffective.

The giant stone arrow hurtled ever closer. The reason I couldn't sense the possibility of *NTR* meant, in short, that this arrow was neither an Earth spell nor a sorcerous attack. It was simply and completely physical.

I could probably have dodged. Activating my sorcery had improved not only my sensory ability, but my physical reaction time. But that wasn't a real option. Behind me were a child and two elderly men. Based on this arrow's diameter and path, Mr. Chotos and the old wagon driver were bound to be caught up in the attack.

The vile trajectory was so clear that I wanted to avert my gaze. I could likely save tiny Teru, if barely, but Mr. Chotos's upper torso and the grandpa's chest would be destroyed, killing them instantly.
I could never allow this—not ever.
But what exactly *could* I do? Time flowed as if in slow motion. I was thinking fast, but I didn't have forever. Goosebumps broke out over my body and unease clenched my heart. I thought I would vomit blood.
The arrow loomed. No good, no good, *I* was no good. No matter how I racked my brain, I couldn't come up with an escape.
I flipped open my robe and raised the jet-black battle-axe in my right hand so the gleaming black blade intersected the arrow's trajectory. This was useless. I was going to die.
And with my death, I'll curse you, you damn criminals!
"Damn iiiit!" With a furious roar, I brought the battle-axe down on the stone missile.
The air rumbled. Violent vibrations shook the atmosphere and rattled my eardrums. A terrifying roar tore through the meadow like a clap of thunder. A great cracking sound followed. Thousands upon thousands of stone fragments hurtled into the forest as if something had exploded.
I resolved myself for pain and death, but it never came. The reason? The golem's enormous stone arrow had, with incredible ease, been reduced to pebbles and dust.
One after another, the arrow's splintered pieces thudded down on the ground. As if it had been slammed down by a remarkably weighty object, the arrow-end of this tragically destroyed spear gouged into the earth by my feet.
With my mouth agape, I stared at the black battle-axe in my hand. It glinted, absolutely spotless.
Huh? You serious? It worked…?
"WHAT?!" Everyone around me, ally and enemy alike, joined in a dumbfounded shout.
Only Teru cheered in joy.
That wasn't my concern right now. The enemy's crossbow golem wielder was skilled indeed—they were still hiding in the forest.
When would a second shot come? How long did it take to reload? What did the description in the illustrated guidebook say again? I desperately tried to remember.
I believed the crossbow golem was categorized as one of the heavy-class golems with the lowest defense. Its image in the guidebook indicated poor proficiency in close-quarters combat, which factored into its design. It was generally only equipped with armor at the chest and around its legs. In fact, the only reason for its size was to increase stability when shooting.
Additionally, the most powerful feature of the crossbow golem was, as its name implied, its crossbow. Its right arm from the elbow downward was

built as a ballista that could fire a stone arrow powerful enough to penetrate a castle wall—
“Ah, right! I just need to cut off his arm.”
I raised the jet-black battle-axe once more. I had recklessly imbued a fairly large amount of mana into this homemade *Earth Battle-Axe* because I was an amateur who didn’t know how to control himself. This golem was likely considerably dense and extremely heavy. That didn’t matter to me. The only thing I cared about was something I could remotely control at will—the reliable weapon I now hefted in my right hand.
“Go!” I threw the battle-axe toward the forest.
It twirled through the air as lightly as a thrown hand axe, a wicked, pure-black wheel of destruction. It hurtled through the forest, cutting down every tree in its path. Any obstruction before this fearsome, super-dense weapon proved absolutely meaningless.
The rotating black blade flew as if it were being sucked toward the heavy-class golem’s shadow—until it severed the golem’s thick right arm at its base. The severed ballista was swallowed by the whirlwind left in the axe’s wake and subsequently destroyed, its fragments scattered.
“All right, strike!” I shouted.
But I couldn’t lose focus. If I grew careless and cut off its mana supply, my *Earth Battle-Axe* would crumble and return to earth. Not only would this expose that the battle-axe had been created by a spell, the destruction of the axe would also deactivate my sorcery, thus extinguishing my heightened senses.
I maintained the supply of mana and guided the devilish black battle-axe in a circular path, returning it to me like a boomerang. I carefully decelerated the returning arc and caught it out of the air.
“All right, then, there we go.” With that skillful maneuver, I covered up my use of sorcery. Um…I did cover it up, right? It was fine, right? No, my acting was flawless. I definitely tricked everyone. I just decided that now.
After coming to this decision, I wiped the sweat off my brow with my free hand. “Phew.”
I was awfully exhausted. This wasn’t stamina or mana fatigue; I was mentally drained. I guess I really wasn’t fit to throw an axe.
Unlike how I had rotated the *Earth Spear* like a flying drill, *Earth Battle-Axe* had to rotate like a frisbee, so its trajectory couldn’t be stabilized. With a spear, I could manage fine control, and speed came naturally. The axe had a wider scope for destruction and seemed flashy, but a spear was much stronger in terms of penetration capability. My adorable *Earth Spear* had faced defeat in its debut fight, but that was just because its opponent, the ancient Earth Dragon, had been a total monster.
Or should I say that not only was controlling the battle-axe’s trajectory difficult, but its collision detection was shoddy at best, which was why I’d ended up mowing down so many innocent trees—and even dragging the nearby golem wielder into the whirlwind along with all that broken foliage.

Luckily, he got off with only a blow to the head, which had knocked him out. But that simple mistake could have become a tragic accident. Any more reckless axe-throwing was out of the question. The senseless damage it wrought was far too serious. Any attempt to defeat one person would inevitably result in over ten unrelated casualties. It was barbaric. Much too barbaric. This axe was a weapon of mass destruction, and therefore was the antithesis of my cultured approach to life.

As a peace-loving soul, I think I should limit myself to using this axe for defensive purposes.

I stared at my friend, the axe, gripped in my hand. It was a new war buddy, along with Gol and that good ol' spear… Augh! I really couldn't get past my concerns about the dangers my friend the axe might pose in the future.

The entire field remained silent. Everyone else was frozen, dumbfounded, and slack-jawed.

At this moment, one of the defeated spellcasters said with the blank face of a dead man, "A nightmare…"

Amidst the motionless adults, only young Teru's cheers continued to echo.

Chapter 21:
Panting and Promise

NO LONGER was this peaceful meadow troubled by grim shadows. The remnant of the giant stone arrow was buried in the ground, its shards scattered. The aftermath of the blazing Fire spells and the fierce battle between golems had devastated large swathes of the earth.

As I stood in the remains of the battlefield, I stared at my axe and pondered. I was still mulling over the safe use of my friend the axe, sure; but more importantly, what exactly was with that crossbow golem's outrageous sniping ability?

That stupidly huge arrow had whizzed toward us from a staggering distance, one that defied the description of crossbow golems in the illustrated guide. Our enemy was indeed remarkable. But as a word, "remarkable" didn't really explain anything.

I understood a golem's relative efficiency could depend quite a bit on their creator's abilities, so perhaps my answer lay in the wielder. It still felt strange, like the golem had been *too* powerful.

Still, I wasn't exactly familiar with fighting norms in this world. I did know that long-ranged attacks were limited here, which meant that crossbow golem's massive long-distance attack gave it an unbelievable edge—so great that it might as well be thought of as a weapon from a whole other dimension. If such an attack were considered normal, it would have appeared in the illustrated guide.

At the same time, unusually powerful golems did exist, like my Gol. Yet I couldn't help being bothered by this.

Nah, but then again…

I was about to be swallowed in a tornado of thoughts when I noticed Mr. Chotos's eyes were glued to my battle-axe.

Gah, this is bad! Damn, did he notice my sorcery?! Although I strove to keep my expression calm, my flustered heart was in a panic.

By contrast, Mr. Chotos gave me a puzzled look. "Nemaki, could that black axe be an ancient mana tool…and a mana weapon to boot?"

"Eh…? Ah, yeah. Of course. Exactly that." I decided to play along. I could read the room!

"I know I shouldn't be surprised anymore, since you're like *that*, but… To think you're a mana weapon wielder, too…" Mr. Chotos droned on, muttering as he stared at the axe. "But do mana weapons fly so wildly through the air like that?"

This damn barcode nonchalantly called me "that" again!

However, it seemed he wasn't under the impression I had used sorcery. So there was a mana tool that resembled my axe…? Frankly, I was relieved. All the blood had rushed to my head when I decided to use sorcery to let my

Earth Battle-Axe fly. I had been too afraid my friends would die, and damn the consequences.
However, now that I had collected myself, I obviously didn't want to be arrested. Moreover, if there was any truth to the contents of Luvel Zairein's stone-book testament, numerous past Sorcerer Kings had been killed. Presumably, they had been eradicated by responsible citizens, or even arrested and given the death penalty.
In other words, if I were arrested, I wouldn't get away with a small mark on my personal record. My life would be in danger. I had no reason to assume the Sorcerer King would be afforded human rights and a fair trial. I trembled in fear at the thought of that which exceeded a witch trial—the trial of a Sorcerer King.
While I tensed, the old driver grinned as he gazed at the pile of defeated spellcasters. "Ah, I'm blown away. You really are as amazing as the rumors say."
He smiled as brightly as the sun. It suited him. I really had to apologize for dragging this grandpa into our personal problems.
"Mr. Nemaki!" Teru suddenly jumped on me.
"Oh, be careful." I pointed the axe in my right hand behind me and made sure to gently catch the innocent young girl with my left.
"Yay! Mr. Nemaki is amazing!" Teru's radiant smile was blinding.
That's right. I was able to protect this five-year-old's smile. As an adult and role model, I'm just relieved I could ensure a safe future for her.
I crouched down to Teru's eye level, patted her head—it's an adult's responsibility to lower themselves so as not to intimidate the young—and smiled back. "Well, there's no reason to let evil flourish in this world. If normal adults like your papa and I were to get a little serious, we could beat all the bad guys."
Mind you, that was a lie. Truthfully, just like Mr. Chotos, I had been pretty much prepared to die. However, this was less a "lie" than one of those bluffs adults must uphold for the good of young folks.
Teru's face was quite close to mine now. From this proximity, I could see the sparkles glittering in her young eyes. Suddenly, she planted a kiss on my cheek. Her lips were warm, soft, and small like a flower bud.
"You really are precious, aren't you?" I sighed as I ran my hand through her fluffy, chestnut hair. Her youthful cheeks were dyed a rosy red.
I supposed she was around that age where girls practice kissing with their stuffed teddy bears. I was sure it must have been hard for Mr. Chotos to wash whatever toy she was presently doting on.
Besides, Teru, you probably don't understand this yet, but you can't just casually give away your kisses. After all, one of your kindergarten friends might misunderstand, and he'll stagger off down a woeful path. A girl your age needs to be responsible with her affections.
Ugh, wait, now that I think about it, isn't this the scene where the protagonist gets kissed by the heroine after defeating a formidable foe and

begins his bittersweet journey to the throne? So then why? Why am I being kissed by a five-year-old?

Ah, this was bad. I was going to cry. Not to mention, if Teru hugged me any more tightly, Mr. Chotos might snap at me again. Plus, Gol would surely want to monopolize her, so—

"Huh? Gol?" I suddenly realized Gol wasn't next to me. Normally, this was the point at which she always kidnapped Teru. Where had my partner gone? I scanned the field. She wasn't near Ginem Bari; he was flat on the ground over yonder, on account of how Gol had punched him. When I looked to the forest, I saw a white figure standing among the newly pruned trees. Found her.

Gol stood with her arms on her hips in front of the large one-armed golem, which had fallen into a sitting position. The mist had at last fully dissipated, exposing the golem's shape. It was short, stout, and tan. So that was a crossbow golem. Heavy-class golems really were tough. While its torso was broad, its arms and legs were also incredibly thick, and not only was it tall, it was wide. All in all, it gave off a completely different impression from a light-class golem. Then again, some of the size came from the armor, so it might not have been all that different from a light-class golem after all.

Several meters to the side of the crossbow golem, among the fallen trees, was the unconscious body of the golem wielder I had caught in the collateral damage of my axe attack. He was young, and he wore an eye patch. He was also bleeding from his head and twitching a bit. I studied his bloodied face, the white of his visible eye showing, when I thought: *Huh? Where have I seen this face before?*

Then I remembered. "Ah! He's that handsome eye-patched fellow who was staring at me in the lobby of the Paisley Company."

To think this eye-patched man was the true identity of the crossbow golem wielder. With his now slovenly expression and rolled-back eye, he no longer resembled the handsome man I had seen in the branch office. That was why it took me some time to realize they were the same person.

Ah. So when he watched me in the lobby, he had been looking at me as a target.

Since the mist had vanished immediately after the eye-patched man was defeated, I surmised the anti-detection spell was one he had cast. The fact that his crossbow golem could fire from an unbelievable distance while he protected both it and himself from detection proved he was profoundly skilled. Frankly, if my senses hadn't been heightened by sorcery, there was no way I would've been able to resist the threat he presented.

However, that was the end of my peaceful contemplation. A dark and furious bloodlust gushed like a flood from Gol's entire being as she stood in front of the crossbow golem.

This was bad. Gol was incandescent with rage. The target of her dense, seething hatred was the crossbow golem.

I couldn’t say I didn’t understand why she was so indignant. I am strikingly unmotivated to act violently, even in self-defense. My rare sense of determination this time around had stemmed from the need to protect my elders and a small child. Hence my *Earth Battle-Axe* shenanigans, which, thankfully, had neatly obstructed the enemy’s attempt to murder me. However, if I had been my usual moocher self and resigned myself to acting as a carefree referee, I would have 100 percent been killed by that last attack, and the perpetrator of that final blow would’ve been the crossbow golem.

“This is bad…” My face paled as I unconsciously uttered these words.

But before I could say anything like “Stop,” Gol slammed her foot into the crossbow golem. Then she straddled her toppled opponent’s chest and began to mindlessly pummel his face.

Wait, I don’t think that’s quite correct—linguistically speaking, I mean. The crossbow golem’s head had already been pulverized by the initial blow, yet Gol continued to shower the area where the head had been with vicious, wrathful punches. She was practically in a frenzied state. She must have been so panicked, so terrified at the thought of losing me.

Each time Gol brought down her fist, the trees in the forest shook as if in an earthquake. Her anger had yet to be sated. She began to rip off the pitiful crossbow golem’s remaining arm. Her thin, white, elven arm strained against the thick tan arm of the crossbow golem and disturbing creaks rang through the air. Finally, with a dreadful crack, the crossbow golem’s arm was disconnected from their shoulder.

“Hey, Gol! The match is over already. Any more would be cruel.” I had rushed over and was finally close enough to walk up to Gol. I truly was a pitiful owner. I hated watching her lose her mind, so I tried to restrain her, but, well…

That is to say, I intended to stop her, and I could have, but—no, hear me out—you understand that to reach her, I had to sprint at full speed across an entire meadow, right?

I was out of breath.

I desperately tried to catch my breath next to Gol, but I lost it all to a gasp. Gol’s blazing red eyes were filled with murderous fury as she raised her right fist even higher into the air. Her target was the golem’s chest, the place where their heart—their sorcery core—resided.

Mr. Chotos had said that no matter how many times a golem’s body was broken in battle, it could be repaired with relative ease. But once broken, the sorcery core that housed a golem’s artificial personality could not be restored. The sorcery core in a golem’s chest was indeed like their heart, since it was formed by the accumulation of their memories and experiences. Destroying it meant “killing” the golem.

So: Gol intended to kill this golem.

“Wait—stop, Gol!” In a daze, I jumped on Gol.

As ever, when I touched her, Gol did not remotely resist me. I crashed into her with all my momentum and she fell over with her right arm still held aloft.
I covered Gol with my whole body, her on her back, so in the end it looked like I had pushed her to the ground. Her body was soft underneath mine, and everywhere we touched I was met by faint warmth.
As I held her down, I stared at her with utter seriousness. Because I had run to her as fast as I could, my breathing was still ragged, like that of an aroused beast, but that couldn't be helped. Each time my hot gasps touched Gol's face and neck, her body twisted as if in pain and her long ears trembled. Her crimson eyes stared up at me, feverish and blurry.
What was this? I sensed some kind of determined resolution in the depths of her eyes, glittering in their daze. It was as if something powerfully important had occurred to her, like she had decided to offer up some precious thing only she possessed, something she could never offer again.
Ah, I got it. She was ready to receive my lecture.
But you know, partner, I don't think you need such heroic resolve for something like this. Aren't you taking my scolding a little too seriously?
Well, whatever. In any case, this was an important conversation. As I lay on top of her, I slowly enunciated, "Hey, Gol. Let's not kill this golem, okay?"
You see, I was against killing golems—generally, as a thing.
"I know you're only doing this because you're thinking of me. This world seems to welcome irrational violence, but no matter how naïve I am, you *must not* think it's fine to go around killing anything and everything. One day, you may be forced to kill people in righteous self-defense…but don't kill their golems."
Gol stared back at me questioningly.
I continued gently. "Gol, I'm sure you would slaughter any enemy without hesitation if I asked you to, right? Well, this huge guy and those clowns are just the same. *They* aren't bad. The bad ones are their *owners*."
I held firm to this belief: It is the responsibility of owners to provide proper training. Any acting out, any improper aggression, is fundamentally *their* fault. Dogs—no, *golems*—are not remotely guilty.
Also, golems could be rendered powerless without having to kill them. You just needed to destroy their head. Therefore, there was no need to go through the trouble of prying off the thick armor covering their chest to kill them.
"You understand? Okay?" While still on top of Gol, I gently stroked her head.
Gol stared blankly back at me as if in the throes of a fever. She was clever; I was sure she understood. And besides, Gol was a good girl who always made sure to keep her promises to me.
Now then, all the enemies on the battlefield had been taken care of.
I got up off of Gol, who seemed oddly reluctant, and returned to the wagon.
While I had run all that way in a panic, I had let the mana supply to my

Earth Battle-Axe cut off. The axe crumbled into black particles inside my robe, leaving a trace of the dirt I had used to create it, then disappeared. With the crumbling of the *Earth Battle-Axe*, my sorcery ended and my spatial awareness returned to normal.
As such, I didn't notice what came next—not in time to stop it. Gol found a new target for her anger and slowly stood up behind me. Her bloodlust rose like a heat haze, and she slowly approached the defeated crossbow golem wielder: the unconscious eye-patched man…

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As I stretched my back, I leisurely scanned the meadow that had become a battlefield. The wagon, the elderly men, and the child were by the road. Slightly further away, a large number of tattered, bloodied spellcasters lay in a burned and ruined land. These were the only things that filled my view, other than a long, white cloud drifting across the beautiful blue sky—a sky in which the only birds I knew about were the ones I could kind of see.
Yeah, this was just right.
When I activated my sorcery, I saw too much, and I ended up thinking with greater seriousness than I usually would. It was mentally draining in the extreme.
With my back stretched, I casually glanced over at Ginem Bari, whose blood was gushing from his nose. I tilted my head as a thought occurred. "Hm…? Now that I think about it, did Gol really let Ginem Bari off with such a weak punch?"
Although he was definitely unconscious, I could tell even from this far away that his injuries were minor. He had fainted after taking a tiny little punch to the face. Compared to the other spellcasters, he'd gotten off quite lightly—they were all thoroughly and severely injured, and most seemed to be in terrible pain.
"Why exactly is that…?" I pondered.
Ah. Now that I thought about it, despite our conflict, Ginem Bari hadn't ever actually attacked *me*. Ultimately, he had only set his clowns on Gol.
Moreover, during the fight, Ginem was the only one of our enemies who'd conversed with me, and had done so rather naturally, at that. Ginem had even casually thrown a compliment to my Gol, which had made me happy and dampened my sense of animosity. Actually, when we talked, I think I'd worn a confident, even smug expression. Truthfully, it hadn't been that different from when I bantered with Mr. Chotos.
Gol never really paid much attention to the conversations I had with other people. However, from her point of view, the tenor of our exchange might have made Ginem Bari level up from "nuisance" to "gaming colleague."
"Well, either way, it works for me." I strolled over to the unconscious golem wielder, the burnt ground crunching beneath my feet.

Ginem looked like he would regain consciousness soon, which was helpful. I needed him to confess to some crimes. Indeed, now that all of this nonsense had happened, I could no longer back down.
I was going to register a formal complaint against those Paisley idiots.

Chapter 22:
First Aid and Low-Blow Kick

"I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY. Hurry up and kill me." Having said this, Ginem Bari shut his mouth. He had awakened from his faint—his minor injuries had let him regain consciousness as quickly as I hoped—and I was interrogating him.

About half of the other spellcasters had remained conscious the whole time, and upon a quick check, none appeared to be deceased. This was no coincidence. I was continually amazed by Gol's developing restraint and the expertise with which she delivered it. I had asked her not to kill anyone, and as such, there were precisely zero deaths. Even in a pitched battle, she had remembered I wanted these guys as witnesses to the crimes of the Paisley Company.

Or—wait a minute. Had Gol at last come to appreciate the sacred beauty of all life…? That would be wonderful! Ah, this bright epiphany was no doubt the result of my dutiful daily training.

In any case, it wasn't that Gol had refrained from killing only because she feared my disappointment. No way, no how, not possible. My partner was always so kindhearted—if she learned to cherish all living things, she would be like unto a goddess of love. Then no one would call her rude names like "Goddess of Slaughter and Jealousy" or "Barbarian Queen."

How should I put this…? I thought "Barbarian Queen" was the least appropriate name for her. Gun to my head, I might yield to "Barbarian Princess." And actually, wasn't this whole naming scheme kind of weird? What did they mean by "Queen"?

"Like, exactly which king is she married to anyway, am I right, Gol?" I asked her.

She had been pressed to my back for some time, as if someone had glued her there. The way she was frantically rubbing her cheek against me felt like a hug. She probably wasn't listening to me at all.

Well, nothing I could do about it. Gol had feared I would die when that stone missile came hurtling at us, to the point that she'd nearly killed the crossbow golem in her fraught state. She had lost herself to terror over my well-being; I had once again made her worry too much. Therefore, I would let her rub all she wanted until her heart settled. After all, an owner is responsible for taking care of their partner's emotional and mental health.

So Gol was still stuck to my back as I crouched down and grabbed the collar of Ginem Bari's robe.

It seemed that Ginem still couldn't move his body very well, but I grabbed his collar to ensure he couldn't run, just in case. I had no intention of intimidating him. I simply had no other option, as I didn't have any handcuffs or rope.

Naturally, I would conduct my interrogation with words and words alone. I didn't know the laws of this world, but I hoped brutality wasn't the standard of legal questioning. As a proud, cultured man, I would never stoop to something as inhumane as torture. Humans are perfectly capable of having a reasoned discussion without relying on violence.
If humanity descended into an endless cycle of throwing axes at fired arrows, we would have no future. My gentlemanly pride demanded I prove right now that reasoned discussion could always overcome brutish tactics.
Ginem's narrow eyes concealed his emotions. "I did the best I could with all the power I held, and I lost. As a golem wielder, I no longer have a reason to live, nor reason to talk. Hurry up and *kill me*."
It was like he wanted to cut my cultured heart off at the pass.
"Wait, listen, I hear what you're saying, but…I don't really have any plans to kill you or anything. Can't we just talk?" I asked.
"…"
No reaction, huh? Welp, I give up. Unless he talks of his own free will, there's nothing I can do.
Ginem Bari might have held his silence out of professionalism. However, he was a professional *criminal*, and when it came to criminal activity, I didn't care if he was a pro or just a bastard.
"If you don't talk, I'll just have to make one of your injured comrades talk for you." I casually glanced about.
Said tattered comrades were all severely wounded. Furthermore, unlike Ginem Bari, they were all, for some reason, terrified of me. The moment our eyes met, their teeth chattered, and some even trembled, their faces pale.
Ugh, this civil conversation just got harder…
"What should I do? This is hopeless," I muttered sadly, eyes downcast.
At that moment, Ginem Bari suddenly screamed. "A-a-ah! Auuughhhh!"
"Huh?!"
I almost let go of his collar in surprise. However, I had learned my lesson. When the leader of those punks in Tibar had begun to scream and cry, I had been startled and let go. Because of that, he escaped. As a result, I had missed my chance to have a discussion—one which could have prevented this whole fiasco.
Therefore, I *couldn't* let go. I tightened my grip on Ginem's collar and drew close to his sobbing face. "Don't go wailing like that. I'm not letting you go. Absolutely not. So let's have a discussion."
"Agh, guh. Such torture—ergh, A-A-AHHHH!"
Ginem Bari's heart-wrenching screams froze everyone in place—not least of all me. The defeated spellcasters stared at me in complete fear and despair, as if they beheld some kind of demon.
Wh-what's with them…?
Although I was shocked, this was Ginem's second round of screaming, so it lacked the impact of the first. It was no use! He couldn't startle me again. I

was a man who learned from his mistakes. This time, I wouldn't lose my chance to talk things out like some kind of incompetent.
Newly resolved, I once again tightened my grip on Ginem's collar. "If we have to, we'll keep at this all day and all night. You got it? So let's talk."
"E-e-eeee! Eek! I-I g-g-got it! I'll talk. I'll talk, all right?! So please, stop!"

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"Well, whatever… I never had any obligation to them anyway," Ginem Bari, exhausted, grumbled in resignation. It sounded like he didn't really belong to the Paisley Company. In any case, he continued explaining himself, piece by piece. "My client is Branch Manager Spero from the Paisley Company. He hired me to dispose of the wielder of the red-eyed shrine golem and his companions, for a total of three casualties. If possible, he wanted the young girl alive."
"Huh? No minors? How surprisingly gentlemanly of him."
"Apparently, they abduct brats for the main office in Kinas to use as bribes for perverted aristocrats—all to influence politics. I don't know the details; this is just a rumor in the circles I run in. But that's probably why he wanted the kid."
"Wh-what the…?" The worst humans imaginable! Return my stolen purity, Paisley!
"I don't know anything else. Really."
"You sure?"
"I said 'really,'" Ginem Bari snapped. Immediately after, he trembled in fear. "Eek! R-really! I swear! Please, no more! I'm just a hired hand. I ain't one of the Company members! And anyway, I was only told to crush *you*, the golem wielder. Everything else was on the other guy! I was just in it for the money! The money!"
N-no need to scream. I can hear you…
Nevertheless, I didn't think he was lying. He just didn't know that much. Mr. Chotos had been astonished by Ginem Bari's appearance, which implied he really was a temp hired specifically to be a secret weapon against me, or rather, Gol.
But, well, a crime was a crime.
That "other guy" he mentioned had to be the eye-patched crossbow golem wielder. It appeared *he* was the barbaric criminal mastermind who had willingly put unarmed civilians in harm's way just to reach me.
"Does that mean you know that eye-patched fellow?"
"Ah, yeah. I think…unlike us, he's with the Company. I heard he's one of the top brass and came from the main office in Kinas."
"Is that so? Well, that might be a problem."
Said eye-patched man's current unconsciousness wasn't the fault of ever restrained Gol, but poorly controlled amateur me. Furthermore, it had been rather the unexpected incident. As such, he was still thoroughly knocked

out, and I had no idea when he would wake up. That once-beautiful man was still lying in the midst of fallen trees, his head bleeding, the white of his eye showing, and his body twitching. There would be no questioning him in that state.

“Well, seeing how this all turned out, I think I believe you…”

Actually, I only had one question about that crossbow golem wielder’s tactics. At the start of the battle, he had lurked in the forest behind and to my right. Usually, that location would have been my natural blind spot. However, during the confrontation, he had kept moving until he finally settled in a spot more directly to my right. In other words, he had abandoned the advantage of my blind spot and opted for a horizontal position.

It was possible he had switched due to some unspoken coordination between the teams. I certainly hadn’t interrogated it too deeply during the fight. However, in the end, he had always intended to fire at me from a distance. So why *did* he go out of his way to move? That was still a mystery. Even if he had sniped me from his starting position, there had never been any threat that he might hit his allies.

But considering Ginem Bari’s claims that the Paisley Company wanted me and the elders dead so they could kidnap Teru, had the bastard intended to kill Mr. Chotos, the old driver, and me all together in one shot?

Ah. Yes. There it was. He finally stopped moving *after* I told my three companions to move, and *after* they had finished moving themselves. In short, Mr. Chotos and the wagon driver hadn’t stumbled into the line of fire, nor had Teru evaded it simply because she was short. No, that man had intended to turn all of us into minced meat while narrowly letting Teru live so he could present her to the Company.

A cold sweat ran down my back. What a disgusting man. Ginem Bari was one thing, but this unnamed, eye-patched man was a fearsome being.

I glanced over my shoulder and shuddered in the direction of the man whom I had inadvertently felled.

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“Nemaki, are you all right?”

“Hm? Ah, yes, I’m fine.”

For some time now, Mr. Chotos had been checking the rest of us for injuries. He carried an aquamarine mana tool that resembled a flashlight. It could activate a beginner-level healing spell that treated wounds just by being held over them. I guess you could call it this world’s version of a first-aid kit.

You know, I had thought Mr. Chotos made quite the speedy recovery after being beaten half to death by those punks, but now I realized he likely owed his health to this little aquamarine guy. And here I’d assumed he just had high vitality.

Anyway, what a convenient mana tool. If there were more like it back at Mr. Chotos's shop, I'd have to buy one for myself. My to-buy list of mana tools just kept growing. If I wasn't careful, I might end up getting distracted and grabbing a bunch of interesting toys. Oh dear. Mana tools could get quite expensive, so if I kept thinking of them that way, I might end up spending my every copper in the blink of an eye.

But…well, even if I did run out of coin, I probably wouldn't *die*.

As usual, I had no knack for managing money.

Once Mr. Chotos had confirmed our party was uninjured, he began administering first aid to the injuries on the staff-wielding female spellcaster.

As Gol and I sat together in the wagon, we watched the aquamarine flashlight slowly heal her wounds. It seemed treatment by mana tool took some time. It had already been close to ten minutes. On the other hand, she would be the only one to receive this time-consuming treatment.

Let me explain. First, you casually kill all the male criminals, as well as all the older women, except for the one beautiful young female miscreant; then you use expensive medicine to treat her; finally, as a roundabout way of showing her gratitude, you end up sharing a nice scene…

I kid; this wasn't some flagrant indulgence in the mental state common to protagonists in harem-centered worlds. In the first place, the one who'd elected to treat her was Mr. Chotos. Also, well, hm, to be clear, of all the injured spellcasters, her wounds were the most severe. Frankly, they were fatal. This was likely due to that inexplicable second bombardment Gol had inflicted upon her.

Basically, if we'd left her alone, she would likely be the sole casualty of our battle. Consequently, she was also the only person in serious need of medical attention.

"Even you can sometimes fail at restraint, huh?" I glanced at my partner. As usual, Gol was stuck to my back, but less usually, her disapproving gaze drilled into Mr. Chotos's back as he healed the female spellcaster.

No, Gol. If Mr. Chotos can't heal her, she'll die. No matter how badly a person misbehaved, I didn't want anyone to die, especially not if there was a possibility we could save them.

"Hey, Nemaki, I don't know why your Goretaru's doing that, but could you curb the weird, menacing aura it's emitting? It's making things a lot harder," Mr. Chotos protested.

Sorry, mister, but even I don't know what's up with her.

Speaking of wounds, Ginem Bari's were strange. At first, I had thought he only took a punch to the face, but when I checked again, it turned out several of the fingers on his right hand had been bent in unnerving directions. I wondered if they had been caught under him when he fell after being punched.

He had my sympathy, but since his life wasn't in danger, he wouldn't get any first aid. This was a race against time. We needed to swiftly return to

Zibil and lodge our complaints with the so-called branch manager of the Paisley Company. If we waited too long, there was no guarantee he wouldn’t send another assassin after us. Therefore, we needed to sort out this matter as quickly as possible.

In the meantime, we would leave the spellcasters where they lay and take our viable witness, Ginem Bari, with us on the wagon back to Zibil.

Well, there was also another reason we needed to hasten our departure. To tell you the truth, when I wasn’t paying attention, Gol saw a chance and threw a low-blow kick directly into the female spellcaster’s stomach. If we didn’t hurry up and separate Gol from the busty lady, it would get bad. As I thought that, Gol darted over to the busty lady again.

No, stop, Gol! Don’t kick the busty woman! Mr. Chotos’s medical treatment will be all in vain!

Chapter 23:
Negotiator and Helping Hand from Behind

A RIVER OF PEOPLE AND WAGONS flowed back and forth through the gray outer walls of Zibil. It was already noontime, so the dense traffic came as no surprise.

Gol and I disembarked from the wagon while Mr. Chotos looked down worriedly from within the canopy.

“Well then, I’ll go talk to Branch Manager Pepperoni now,” I said.

“Everyone, wait here.”

“It’s Branch Manager Spero, got it? Will you really be all right, Nemaki? The way you’re talking…it’s making me nervous.”

“Right, Spero. I tried to erase him from my memory, and his stupid name was the first thing to go. I’m good, though. Leave it to me.”

“Oooh, I’m worried…”

Mr. Chotos and I had decided it would be safest for me and Gol to be the ones to deal with the Paisley Company. The witness, Ginem Bari, would accompany us to our discussion, while the remaining three would stay in the wagon parked outside the gates.

The Paisley Company seemed to be comprised of the sort of people who did whatever they wanted, but the Company preferred to maintain the veneer of a proper business. Until now, none of their untoward behavior had been disclosed to the city. Because so many people passed through the main gate, if we parked the wagon nearby, the Company wouldn’t be able to lay a hand on us unless they wanted to put their reputation on the line.

And anyway, I intended to finish this discussion before any new troublesome situations arose.

“Well, I’m off,” I announced.

“Hey, Nemaki,” Mr. Chotos called out and stopped me.

“What’s up?”

“Um, I really think you should let me handle the negotiation…”

“Come on, we’ve discussed this already. If you went to the office, they’d just have some punk knock you out with a single punch. But if Gol and I go, we can safely withdraw even if discussions break down. It can only be us.”

“But—”

“I didn’t really want to say this because it feels rude, but…I’m a foreigner, Mr. Chotos. You, meanwhile, know your way around this city, and you fit right in. That means *you’re* the one best suited to ensuring the safety of the others, especially if you have to escape and get through the gate. That part *has* to be you.”

“Ugh, I know.” Mr. Chotos reluctantly backed down, but not before he said, “Please, be careful, Nemaki. Try not to do anything reckless. All we want is mutual noninterference. Don’t go making any extra demands.”

“Ah, yes, yes. I know. I know.” However, I irresponsibly ignored every one of Mr. Chotos’s overprotective-parent warnings.
Then Teru popped her head out of the wagon. “Bye-bye, Mr. Nemaki!”
“Okay! Well, I’m off now.” I smiled and waved at Teru’s farewell before turning.
“Ah, wait, Nemaki! I’m not done!” Mr. Chotos was saying yet another something-something behind me, but I didn’t care.
Accompanied by Gol and the prisoner, Ginem Bari, I strode to the outer gate. Ginem’s hands were lightly restrained with a rope that had been in the wagon. With Gol on alert, any further restraint was unnecessary. He seemed to have resigned himself to capture, and had been obedient the whole ride back, neither struggling nor resisting once inside the wagon. Now, he trudged behind me, shoulders drooped. After his jester golem partners were beaten, he had gone quiet and meek.
But again, I couldn’t say I didn’t understand how he was feeling. If our positions were switched and I was marched into Zibil by the clown brigade without Gol, I wouldn’t feel up to resisting, either. That is to say, I deeply sympathized with Ginem Bari.
We slipped between the wagons lined in front of the gate and arrived at the other side. For some reason, at this point, the thus-far-obedient Ginem Bari burst into tears of protest.
“N-no, I really can’t…! I failed my job. There’s no way I can show my face at the Company. Please don’t make me!”
I understood this, too. If I were in his shoes, I definitely wouldn’t want to venture into the Paisley Company’s branch office. I would’ve tried to run with everything I had.
However, he was a critical eyewitness. I needed him to come with us.
“Please don’t be so unreasonable, Ginem. Your testimony is indispensable.”
But Ginem Bari planted himself on the ground and refused to move. He was just like a child throwing a tantrum in front of a toy store.
I was at a loss. I couldn’t do something violent like forcibly drag him along. In the first place, I didn’t have the physical strength. Ginem Bari was a fully grown adult; there was no way I could carry him around like a baby.
Wait. Carrying a baby? Hm. Gol was powerful *and* good at carrying. If I asked, my partner would kindly carry Ginem in a warm embrace overflowing with love. Case in point: This experienced fellow right here (me) had embarrassingly been carried in this way numerous times already.
“Hey, Gol. I’m really sorry to ask you, but do you think you can carry Ginem to the Company for me?” I asked Gol. I believed in her ability to handle our precious cargo with care.
Gol, the goddess of love with the compassion of a saint, slowly walked over to Ginem, who was whining like a child on the street. I was relieved to see her comply and turned back to the main gate.
All right, the real battle starts now.

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We didn't have any particular trouble passing through the city's main gate. In fact, I would say we entered without any problems. When I approached, the gatekeepers moved aside, opening the road for us.
The first time we'd come to Zibil, we needed to pay money to procure entrance. Was there a different procedure for entering on foot versus in a wagon? Well, that did sound possible. Perhaps there was a special city tax for vehicles. Or maybe there was a tax on load. I couldn't help wondering about it as we passed through the gate. The officials and gatekeepers all looked oddly pale.
In any case, once we entered the city, there wouldn't be any obstacles between us and the Paisley Company. We'd reach the building in no time. Moments ago, Ginem Bari had been making a racket, but it seemed he had quieted down. No doubt Gol's gentle embrace had made his childish heart calm, like a boy in his mother's arms. I believed wholeheartedly in my partner's carrying technique, so there was no need for me to turn around and check. That confidence just went to show how much trust I had in her and our relationship.
As we approached the Paisley Company building, the number of people on the cobblestone streets increased.
"There sure are a lot of folks out and about…" I murmured.
It was getting kind of hectic, to be honest. At first, I chalked it up to the time of day, but that didn't seem quite correct. The lines of people on both sides of the road continued to grow. What a strange feeling. There were even people watching from the windows of their homes. Was a festival parade coming through here later or something? Or perhaps there was a marathon? That was how it felt. Maybe if we finished negotiations quickly, we could go watch with everyone. Teru would be delighted.
"Wh-what's this…? Public humiliation? That shrine golem has that man by the head!"
"Could that bloodied fellow actually be the Four Jester Wielder Ginem Bari…?"
"Did he somehow lose a golem battle?"
"How awful. Not only did they beat his face in, his fingers are horribly broken. What cruel tortures was he subjected to?"
The lines of people chattered noisily amongst themselves.
Honestly, I wasn't concerned with they said. To be blunt, I didn't have the mental capacity to pay attention. I was actually terribly nervous about my grim responsibility in this upcoming discussion.

***

We soon arrived in front of the Paisley Company's Zibil branch office. The large two-story wooden building really was imposing, the fortress of an

economic giant. The Company was far more powerful financially than puny me and my meager five gold coins.
But I wouldn't retreat. I was here to lodge a complaint. My determination would no longer waver. For the futures of young Teru, the gentle old driver, and I'll even throw in that pitiful balding man for good measure—for them, I would be dauntless in the face of this challenging negotiation.
The Paisley Company was an evil business that committed all sorts of depraved and illegal acts behind the scenes. I was sure they would deny my accusations and might even try to make cowardly threats. But as a proud, cultured man, I would not yield, not by a single step. Right now, I was a negotiator. I focused my mind and pumped myself up.
"Hey, he's walking straight into the Paisley Company while his golem holds the Four Jester Wielder like—like—augh, I can't look!"
"Looks like he's going to fight the Company."
"Catching the ire of that brutal golem wielder… The branch manager is done for."
"I don't care why, but please, I beg of you. Please, avenge my son…"
"I-I…I've heard of that shrine golem wielder. The rumors say he's a bloodthirsty nightmare who annihilated the Swordbreaker and his gang in a gruesome display of vigilante justice merely because they happened to bother him on a stroll. I believe his alias was, um, Something of Tibar… Ah, right. He's the Nightmare of Tibar!"
The crowd seemed awfully chatty. Unfortunately, I had reached peak mental load, so none of it reached my ears.
I pushed open the branch office's doors, strode through the entrance hall, and made my way to the lobby.
"I would like to request a meeting with Branch Manager Spero," I said to the receptionist in as clear a tone as I could muster. I admit I conveyed this in a somewhat loud voice. While I needed to remain formal, I also wouldn't get anywhere with timidity.
However, for some reason, all the employees stiffened when they saw me. There were numerous other people present—customers, external traders and the like—but they froze, too. Not a single person spoke, not a one moved. Everyone simply stared at me as if caught in ice.
It felt like time had stopped.
"Ah, um…haah…haah…" One of the male personnel who looked like one of those handsome athletic types attempted to say something. In the end, he continued to trip up, nonsensical mumbles dribbling from his trembling mouth.
What is this? Come on, bro, stop that. You're making me super nervous.
Maybe I hadn't spoken clearly after all? Honestly, my voice might have been hoarse on account of just how nervous I was.
I decided to try again, and I spoke once more, noticeably louder and stronger as I strove for clarity. "I'll say it one more time: I want you to bring

out your branch manager. You're making people wait, and I don't have time for this. Please don't make this any harder."
If the negotiations took too long, we'd have to spend another night in Zibil. Frankly, we were tight on time. At this rate, it was possible we wouldn't get back to Tibar until after nightfall. Because the Paisley Company idiots were such selfish time-wasters, Mr. Chotos's finances would take a hit and might even become strained. The unexpected inn expenses alone would be quite a burden.
As I recalled how Mr. Chotos looked the night before we departed for Zibil, when he despairingly calculated the costs for repaying the debt and travel expenses late into the night, my face unconsciously turned a bit dour.
At that moment, several employees noticed the change in my expression and turned green. They bolted into the depths of the building.
Ah, one of them tripped. Are they okay…? Ugh, I know I'm filing a complaint, but their customer service seems absolutely horrid.
On that topic, I had noticed something about the personnel. There were two types of beautiful people: those whose faces maintained their beauty even when distorted with high emotion, and those whose faces became terrible. I had just learned this fun new fact.
A moment later, I heard voices quarreling in a hallway farther inside. Soon, several employees were pushing a familiar man out of the hallway: Branch Manager Spero.
The dashing, monocle-wearing man with salt-and-pepper hair was frantically shouting. He was unbearably loud, and his cries echoed something along the lines of "How dare you lowlifes sell me out!" and "Why have all the guards run away?!"
Still, this argument between the handsome young men and beautiful older man could have been a most charming painting. I didn't mind getting to see such a museum-worthy sight. That was, ultimately, a worthwhile new experience.
As the Company personnel scrambled about in the hallway, they began to throw blame at each other. While I watched them argue, I blurted out a sudden thought, "Oh, yeah. Given when the wagon's Wind flotation box broke, it was definitely you guys, huh? I should demand compensation for the old driver as well."
At this, the back-and-forth between Spero and the male employees grew more pitched. The nearby female employees raised equally pitched monkey screams. But since everyone was beautiful, visually speaking, it still wasn't that bad to see, honestly.
In the end, the hallway scuffle resulted in Spero being pushed out into the lobby by several of his subordinates. When he resisted, he ended up scattering all the papers on a desk to the floor as his hands waved about.
Jeez, what a mess. These Paisley folks came off as an overwhelmingly gorgeous group of elites, but now that their true nature and lack of basic morals had been revealed, their stunningly average abilities just made them

look ever more pathetic. Did this Paisley Company really unironically hire people solely based on their looks?
In any case, I was surprised the business had done so well thus far, given the quality of their staff. Maybe this discrepancy was a mere side effect of their underhanded elimination of opposing businesses by way of the same tricks they'd employed on us.
While I contemplated the Company's organizational image, Branch Manager Spero finally tumbled out in front of me. He looked dashing as usual, but his hair was disheveled, his monocle was going to fall off, and sweat streaked his forehead and armpits.
"Hey," I said.
"No! D-don't come near me! You damn monster of a golem wielder!" As soon as I spoke, Spero fell into a panic and tried to scramble back, but he slipped on the documents he had scattered before and stumbled straight into the desk.
"Kkh… grgghh." Spero crumpled to the ground, making a horrible croak and strange breathing sound.
This was bad. He might've broken some ribs. I rushed over to Spero and raised him up. "Hey, you okay?" I asked. Naturally, as the model of gentlemanly conduct who held chivalry close to his heart, I tended to Spero with fully good intentions.
Despite that, veins popped out on his bright-red face as he glared at me. "G-guh… I'm…I am the Zibil branch manager…of the Paisley Company. I-I won't ever accept your damn demands."
"Ah." Then I remembered. That was right. I'd come here to negotiate. Everyone had started squabbling and squawking like those wretched monkeys, so my original goal had slipped my mind.
Anyway, it appeared it was at least possible to have a conversation with Spero. Since I finally had my chance, I aimed to start the settlement negotiations. I didn't really like the idea of grabbing collars, but by now I was well aware that if I carelessly released him, he might try to run away and end up tripping and hurting himself again.
"No, you need to listen to what I have to say." I stared straight into Spero's eyes and tightened my grip on the collar of his robe. "I have two demands. They are very simple. The first is that you will no longer involve yourself with miste—with the people from Chotos's Mana Tool Shop. The other is that you will pay the cost for repairs as well as an inconvenience fee to the elderly driver of the wagon whose Wind flotation box you broke. Of course, you won't meddle with him again, either."
Mr. Chotos had droned my ear off, telling me future mutual noninterference was our only demand, but I ignored his overcautious pleas and decided to demand compensation for the wagon grandpa.
I mean, I was pissed. I needed the Company to make full amends for their grave sin of stealing the smile from my grandpa when they involved him in their malicious misbehaviors.

Of course, if I were to be frank, I also wanted to demand compensation for Mr. Chotos and myself. But, well… What if, by bringing up the matter of compensation for the ruckus the assassins caused, I accidentally wrapped back around to the violent incident the other day when Gol abruptly left all those debt collectors in a half-dead state—which could lead to *me* being the one compelled to pay?

At the time, the matter had been left unaddressed. However, if this story came up, Mr. Chotos might safely receive his due, but I was sure I would end up with the burden of huge medical bills as a consequence for being Gol's negligent owner.

Sorry, mister. Give up on any payback for now. I'll make sure Gol understands she can't do anything like that again.

"I-I won't accept…your damn demands…" Spero repeated.

"What did you say?" I asked. Ah, shoot. It appeared I really shouldn't have ignored Mr. Chotos's advice and added a personal demand.

Sorry, mister. Forgive me. No matter what kind of person you are, you're still a senior and your words should be respected. I mentally expressed my deep regret to Mr. Chotos.

On the other hand, Spero glared at me with his face twisted in hatred and his eyes bloodshot. Incidentally, this dashing man was the type of beauty whose face turned repulsive when emotional. "I am from Kinas and I am of pure blood! My lineage, character—everything about me is superior to you moronic country bumpkins and vile savages from the eastern frontier! I will never yield to scum like you!"

"What?" I was bewildered by this spitting, red-faced man's feeble-minded statement. What did our conversation have to do with race? Racists and elitists of all kinds were terrible; the thought processes of such distorted people were truly incomprehensible to me.

To make matters worse, it seemed that in his fear, this man had lost all composure and good judgment. I honestly didn't know why he was so afraid of me when I'd only come to talk, but we weren't making any progress. This was bad. He had the face of an intellectual, but within, he was a feral monkey. What could I do? At this rate, we wouldn't be able to settle anything.

I admit I became a little gloomy and muttered, tears in my eyes, "This is hopeless…"

Suddenly, Spero screamed like it was the end of the world. "Gaahhhhh! Arrrrghhh! Eeeek! Oh NOOOOO!"

"Huh?!" I was so startled that I almost released him—but I remembered that I couldn't let go. I couldn't allow this opportunity to negotiate to escape, not for anything. *What the heck are you getting so timid for, me? Remember who you're doing this for.*

Just then, I felt something soft and warm at my back. It was Gol. She draped herself over my spine, popped her head over my shoulder, and frowned at me with a worried face. She was no doubt concerned by my hopelessness.

Huh? That reminds me, Gol. What happened to Ginem Bari?
Well, whatever. She was right. I didn't want to make her worry, and as her partner, I had to show her I could settle this difficult challenge with aplomb.
I once again tightened my grip on Spero's collar. My partner's support had filled me with determination. I was sure I could do this. Rather, I had no choice but to do it.
"Hey, Mr. Branch Manager," I began, but when I brought my face close to Spero's, I found myself thinking: *Isn't he panicking kind of a lot?*
Everyone, personnel and customers alike, was staring at me in some kind of petrified horror. Was something wrong with my face?
Ugh, I knew my face wasn't the friendliest. When I'd seen my expression reflected in the ancient Earth Dragon's dying eyes, I hadn't looked like a mere delinquent—I'd looked like a Demon King of Hell Unending. If a fainthearted person had seen me then, they would have burst into tears and begged for their life.
Oh no—could it be that I've been unintentionally intimidating and oppressing people just like those advocates of violence I abhor with every cell of my being? Ah, right, okay, a smile… What I need now is a smile.
I smiled sweetly and got even closer to Spero.
The moment I smiled, I failed to notice that the onlookers paled and shook even more terribly.
"I don't care about your lineage," I said. "I want you to listen to our demands and find a compromise. So let's talk."
"D-damn brat. I'm *above* you. I will *never* yield. I am a beautiful person of superior lineage, chosen by—auuuughhh!"
"Hm?!"
Spero began to scream again. However, I didn't even flinch.
Sorry, I lied. I was actually startled and moved a little. However, I managed to maintain my smile. "Like I said, I don't care about your circumstances. I only care that you listen to my demands… So hey, let's *talk*, okay?"
"Talk or not, this kind of…torture wo—gaahhhhh!"
I was baffled, but I strove to maintain my smile. "Speak in words that even I can understand. If answering in sentences of your own devising is too hard, you can just reply, 'Yes, I understand.' So give it a rest and let's talk."
"Thamn savage gihh—gahhh—auuggghhh!"
I blinked.
"Hah gangh ngh! Ngh?! HooOooOOOOOHH!"
"Eh?"
Huh? Two times in a row, now?
As I stared in utter bafflement, the two soft, marshmallowy pillows pressed against my back moved delicately leftward. This time, Gol quietly popped her head over my left shoulder.
What is it, Gol? Is this a new game? You know, I'm kind of in the middle of an important conversation with the manager… The difficulty of this negotiation had spiked.

While the trajectory of the two parties failed to intersect, Spero screamed for the fifth time. Excluding the first series of loud screams, he had now screamed a total of ten times. At this point, Gol finally separated from me.
Are you sulking because I didn't play with you? Sorry, partner. Once I finish this job, I'll play with you a bunch.
Although I inwardly apologized to Gol, the situation wasn't progressing. Spero started screaming all over again.
Hm. This wasn't the first time I'd encountered this phenomenon. It had been the same with Ginem Bari and the large leader of the punks. It appeared that sometimes the people of this world let out a tremendous scream in order to intimidate their opponent and, if possible, escape. I could probably attribute this strategy to some sort of otherworldly cultural quirk, but for now I'd avoid making any claims.
Each time Spero screamed, some of the onlookers wobbled, and some eventually began to faint from dizziness. No one left the building, though. Everyone was glued to their spot as if they had lost the use of their legs. In other words, Spero's screams were intimidating the crowd, innocent and otherwise. Ugh, what a problem. This man always found stunning new ways to disappoint me.
Also—I wrinkled my nose—the horrible stench of blood was coming from somewhere. Had I gotten some of Ginem Bari's on my robe? I needed to check later.
Spero screamed an additional ten times after Gol separated from me. In total, the number of times he had screamed today exceeded twenty. In a way, his capacity for screaming amazed me.
As I frowned at his unsightly behavior, which was unbefitting of a working man, Gol stuck herself on my back again and popped her head over my right shoulder.
Oh? You came back, huh, partner? Where have you been playing?
Gol's long elven ears tickled my right cheek. The two of us exchanged a glance and had a silent conversation for some time. This was the very image of a heartwarming connection between two trusting partners.
In contrast, Spero's expression when Gol returned to my right shoulder was truly something. He vibrated in fear, and his eyes filled with the hopeless despair of a sinner thrown into Avīci, the lowest and most dreadful level of hell.
In any case, since the branch manager had been screaming his head off this whole time, was it possible he had already forgotten the contents of my demand? *I should probably reiterate them just in case.*
"Hey, Mr. Branch Manager." With a warm smile, I spoke to Spero in the kindest voice I could. "If you really didn't understand what I was saying, I don't mind giving you an overview. It's a little frustrating, but it can't be helped. I'll just have to keep explaining it until you understand, right? So let's talk, okay?"

Spero was drenched in sweat as he wheezed, his face ashen. His eyes had become dull and his dilated pupils didn't seem able to focus.
Well, that's what he gets for all that screaming.
"E-eek! N-no more. Puhleeze fuhgive… Guh arrggghhh!"
For a while now, I had been hearing these odd cracks, like something thick had been broken, or snaps, like something hard had been twisted. However, they were practically drowned out by Spero's terrible howling.
Furthermore, he had been screaming so close to my face that my ears were ringing.
I thought that maybe those sounds were all in my head. To tell you the truth…I really didn't know.
"Hey, if we keep having to do this over and over again, we're going to reach the end of business hours, you know? Don't you guys have a reputation for prompt work?" I suggested this to Spero with a smile. "So let's hurry up and get started."
"Aah, aah. I'll do whaehbur ou say, so… Please. Please nuh muure…" Just like that, Spero finally stopped objecting with those awful wails and decided to listen.
As long as you persevere and strive, you can engage in sincere discussion, no matter how stubborn your opposing party or how difficult the negotiation. I felt like I had reached new heights as a peaceful, cultured man.
Filled with a sense of accomplishment, I smiled—not a forced smile, but one of genuine pleasure. Still pressed to my back, Gol looked elated.

Chapter 24:
Gentle Wife

I SLUMPED IN A CORNER of the covered wagon tucked away in the corner of Zibil's outer wall, out of sight of all but a few people.

By most standards, the results of my negotiations with the Company were a huge success. I made Branch Manager Spero promise not to interfere with Chotos's Mana Tool Shop—or, indeed, all of Tibar. And I reminded him that if he broke his promise, I would return with even more vigorous protests.

I also received an exorbitant sum of money as compensation for the wagon grandpa. Several terrified employees shoved large bags of money, bulging with coins, into my hands. The bags were so heavy that Gol had to carry them. Given our prior conversation, the Company's charity surprised me, but at least now the grandpa could live out the rest of his days in peace and leisure.

Well, I suppose the Company *had* dragged the grandpa into a horrible experience he had nothing to do with, so they owed him. He offered to split the money with Mr. Chotos and me, but because his wagon had suffered the most damages, I thought he should take it all. If he insisted later, I wanted him to split it between only himself and Mr. Chotos, as I had deprived Mr. Chotos of his own compensation with my failure to curb Gol's misbehavior at his shop.

In any case, I mean it when I say my negotiations were wildly successful. I was disheartened for a different reason.

"Sorry, Ginem…" I said with a wince.

Ginem Bari lay covered in wounds within the wagon as Mr. Chotos administered first aid with that flashlight mana tool.

Just before the negotiations had settled, I released Spero and stood, at which point the grotesquerie of Spero's body caught me off guard. Not only were his joints dislocated, but the bones in each of his shins and forearms were broken. Furthermore, all twenty fingers on both his hands and feet were twisted into spirals. On top of that, the nails on his fingers had been meticulously peeled away and—

No, let's stop the description here. Ugh. Just remembering it makes me feel sick…

What exactly had happened to Spero? Had it been a ghastly otherworld phenomenon? It all left me far too frightened to ask, so I'd taken a few steps back. As I did, my heel bumped into something.

When I turned and looked down, I thought my eyeballs would pop out as I beheld an even more overwhelming horror, one that blew the abominable sight of the branch manager straight out of my head. The witness Ginem Bari lay at my feet, a pile of bloody scraps.

In a panic, I rushed to lift him in my arms and desperately called out to him, but he kept muttering in a weak, incoherent voice, “Help me… I’m sorry…”
He had experienced something truly horrid. My chest tightened. I had an idea of what had left Ginem Bari in such a sorry state. No—rather than an idea, I had no doubt. Logically, there was only one conclusion to draw. In the mere moments we had taken our eyes off Ginem Bari, our star witness, the vile Paisley Company had sent minions to assault him in order to destroy the evidence.
I had failed to protect the witness, even though we forced him to accompany us to the negotiations, which made him our responsibility. My body burned with guilt and remorse.
“Oh, woe is me. What a failure I am.” When I secretly covered my face, on the verge of tears in the corner of the wagon, Gol peered over at me in concern.
As Gol gazed at me with her gentle eyes, I weakened and spilled the contents of my heart to her. In the throes of regret, I needed to confess to someone—anyone. “Gol…Gol, I’m mortified. Because of my incompetence, I couldn’t stop the Paisley Company from brutalizing the witness.”
I couldn’t stand knowing that a defenseless person had been horrifically injured by senseless violence, and all on my account. Just talking about it brought more tears to my eyes.
In the past, whenever I got this sad, I would hug my dog and have a good cry. I let out a shaky sigh. “Such a cruel company of criminals should just poof and disappear…”
This thought had smoldered in the honest depths of my heart. When I finally released it, a gust of wind blew along the gray outer walls of Zibil. Gol’s long ears swayed faintly, as if she were trying to pick up some distant sound drifting along the wind.
My shoulders drooped as I stumbled further into my confession. “But you know, Gol… The worst person here has to be the one who didn’t properly protect the witness, the one who’s always spoiled by your kindheartedness: me. I…I just want to disappear.”
As I cried, Gol wiped my tears with her finger. She always stuck close to me and paid heed to everything I said. My partner couldn’t speak, but she was the world’s best listener.
“Thanks for listening to me,” I murmured. Having vented all my frustrations, I softly stroked Gol’s head.
Oh? Whenever I pet her like this, she usually fluttered her ears in delight like a dog wags its tail. This time, however, her reaction was minimal. She just stared at the tears streaking down my face, unmoving.
“All right!” I slapped my cheeks to motivate myself. You were a big help, partner. Talking with you about everything suddenly made me feel a lot better.

It was time to shift gears, and quickly. We could still help the grievously injured Ginem Bari. My ability to quickly switch gears is the one of which I'm proudest.
I raised my head and, with my usual enthusiasm, rejoined Mr. Chotos and the others. At this moment, I didn't notice how Gol quietly disappeared from behind me.

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The onlookers at the Paisley Company's Zibil branch office had dispersed and the office doors were tightly shut.
In the lobby, which was littered with scattered documents, Branch Manager Spero yelled at the personnel running about as his spittle flew through the air. "What the hell were you bastards doing? Each and every one of you—useless! Useless dimwits!"
In his rage, Spero wanted to slam his fist on the desk, but his right arm was stiff and he couldn't raise his shoulder any farther up. He couldn't even make a fist, though neither could he open his hand.
Hired spellcasters had healed his wounds moments ago. For the most part, his limbs appeared to have returned to their original state. However, a portion of both his hands and his left foot still couldn't move at all, even after the spellcasters used an advanced healing-type Water spell meant for emergency treatment.
However, the Water spell wasn't omnipotent. Hardly any spellcasters could treat the most serious injuries, or those that involved bodily loss. For the latter, they required an aptitude with the rare Life attribute. There was no telling if Spero would ever be able receive that kind of treatment. In any case, his limbs had been so horribly disfigured he would inevitably experience complications in the future.
"Damn! This fiasco is all that Ject Baro's fault. That uppity eye-patched bastard. He was all talk and no action." Spero spat under his breath, which was still rough.
The young Ject Baro had happened to be visiting from the main office in Kinas on other business, and he showed significant interest in the series of incidents involving that shrine golem wielder. Ject Baro had an impeccable success rate, and he professed himself a rare crossbow golem wielder. Moreover, this young man was frequently kept by *that person's* side as a favored subordinate. For all these reasons, Spero had accommodated him. And yet…
"I did exactly what he asked. I even paid a huge sum in advance to hire the Four Jester Wielder and his contingent from the Spellcaster's Association… Yet they were all defeated without laying a scratch on some random golem wielder from who knows where. What an absolute disaster!" Spero snarled as he scowled at his stiff right arm.

That shrine golem wielder from the east… That brat who ruined his limbs. Spero swore to never forgive him. As he did, his face reflected in the polished surface of a high-quality white desk. Though Spero's face was usually most charming, it was now wretchedly disfigured by anger.
Up to this moment, he had always acted in direct accordance with the decrees of *that person*, that beautiful princess, and had never once failed. This was supposed to have been a simple job.
Spero was proud to have been chosen as a superior human being, and he often boasted of his stunning record. He would never allow some nobody to wound his pride.
"I need more people," Spero snapped. "Hire anyone useful. Money is no object. File a request to deploy more personnel from the main office."
One of the subordinates grimaced with displeasure. "The main office, sir? But, branch manager, if we disclose these failures, they'll impact our assessments…"
"No one said you had to be stupid and file an honest report! Just make up an appropriate excuse. What the hell is that brain in your skull for?!"
Spero, enraged by the subordinate's cowardly quibbling, swiped his stiff arm across the desk. His elbow collided with the high-quality liquor that had been used to bring him back to his senses, and the bottle crashed to the floor, shattering.
"Hah, phew…" As Spero stared at the mess of shards in the pooling stain, he snorted and panted. "What an outrageously cruel demon of a man… Yet he showed an inversely gentle attitude toward his relatives. If his power renders him too difficult to kill directly, we'll just need to turn our efforts toward his precious family."
Gray-haired Spero's wide eyes glowed with homicidal delight. "First, we'll assassinate the imbecilic owner of that mana tool shop—display his corpse on the road as an example to others. Torture the daughter all you like, but don't kill her. She'll be useful as a hostage. Show that brat a tragedy to carve inside his eyelids, one that he'll never unsee."
Spero listed all of this in one breath, then paused before continuing, as if nonchalantly ordering an additional cup of cheap alcohol, "Ah, right. Find out who that old geezer driving their wagon was and kill him. That brat was strangely particular about that filthy old man. I'm sure he'll show us the most magnificent expressions when we have our say."
"I understand, sir. I'll handle the arrangements."
The subordinates received Spero's instructions and flew off to their work. To them, this kind of job was nothing more than a daily task to which they had long since become accustomed.
Beautiful, capable men and women moved swiftly through the gorgeous office. The scene was like unto one that had manifested from an artistic masterpiece.
Spero gazed upon it in satisfaction. His distorted face slowly eased back to its usual handsome state, and a faint smile crossed his well-defined mouth.

“Hmph, what a foolish brat. Did he really think we would abide by something like a ‘mutual noninterference agreement’?”
Suddenly, something shining and white broke through the ceiling and landed in the lobby.
Everyone froze in astonishment, staring and unable to speak.
Pieces of the ceiling thudded and clattered to the floor. However, that snow-white shape had made not a single sound as it fell along with the bricks.
The sunlight filtering through the hole in the ceiling illuminated the immaculate figure. It resembled a young woman. Crimson eyes. Long ears. Flowing, silky hair. An ephemeral maiden. The person standing stock still against this light was breathtakingly solemn and possessed of a beauty that inspired great longing. Even children would have known she was the very image of the goddess of antiquity, the deity of the ancient race that appeared in folklore.
However, the crimson eyes of the goddess standing before them brimmed with grim darkness, cold and obscure—the eyes of someone staring at an insignificant bug right before they crushed it.
At this moment, with a collective shudder, everyone remembered the sharp-eyed, black-haired young man wearing an olive-brown robe. That foreign golem wielder had directed his golem to wave his defeated enemy like a flag as he, uninjured, strolled into their office seemingly without hostility, even though they had sent an assassin to kill him. Then, with a smile, he precisely manipulated his golem to conduct a bloodcurdling torture session.
And the words he left behind…
“The moment you break your promise, I’ll be back for another ‘negotiation.’”
Without warning, the white goddess blurred. Then, everyone’s sight jolted violently and the scene before them turned scarlet.
It was the last thing they saw.

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As our wagon departed the city of Zibil, Ginem Bari sat, trembling, in one of the corners of the slightly rocking carriage as he hugged his knees.
How pitiful. That cowardly assault by the Paisley Company had deeply scarred his heart. His wounds had been treated, but his face was still swollen in places, and his bandaged fingers looked to be in pain. Those injuries would take a long time to fully heal.
Sorry, Ginem. I only took my eyes off you for a second… I was once again depressed by my negligence.
Before we departed, the old driver opened a part of his cargo and gave us several of the peach-looking fruits inside. I asked Gol to cut them for us. She used her favorite green knife to cut the fruit into adorable yet elegant bite-sized chunks, into which I stuck toothpicks before I passed them along to Mr. Chotos, Teru, and the driver.

I held out the last piece to Ginem Bari. Ginem's fingers shook as he accepted it.
I didn't think he was such a bad guy. His jester golems had been polished until they gleamed. I was sure he thoroughly wiped them down every single day. Moreover, there were *four* clowns. Four of them. When I thought of four Gols begging to be wiped down every night on the bed, I grew faint. Well, I'd do it, but…
That reminded me. We needed to make sure we recovered his clowns on our way back.
Let's play the golem-fighting game again once they're all better.
As I chomped on the sweet peach, I gazed out at the scenery from the back of the wagon. The gray walls of Zibil had grown so small. Soon, I wouldn't be able to see them anymore.
"Hm? That's…" I peered.
A thin line of smoke rose from the city. What was that? A fire, perhaps? Ah, right. Just before we departed, the city had become rather noisy. When I headed to the branch office, a ton of people were gathered along the roadside as if waiting for something. Was there really a festival happening today? In that case, that had to be a festive fire of sorts.
Plenty of countries lit bonfires during festivals. Turned out this world was no exception. Fire was sacred in many cultures, after all.
As I watched the trail of smoke in the distance, I thought of roasting sweet potatoes on an open fire.
"Hey, mister."
"Hm? What is it, Nemaki?"
"Um, does this world…ah, no. Does this *country* sell something like a freshly baked sweet potato that's soft and flaky? There was something like that in my hometown."
Mr. Chotos looked thoughtful, stroking his short mustache and speaking in a contemplative tone. "If you're looking for that kind of sweet potato, you probably need to visit the warmer regions of the country—the southern territories. They're sold in the big city markets, too. I ate them many times back when I was young and peddling in various lands."
"Oh, so they do exist." I could have roasted sweet potatoes in this world! I was excited.
"Then again, it's hard to come by that sort of produce in Tibar and Zibil."
"Aw, is that so…?" I deflated.
"Well, the potatoes around here aren't bad. If you want, I'll make a potato dish for you later."
No, that's not what I meant, mister.
Well, whatever. I didn't mind entertaining the idea of tasting some local potato dish.

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When we arrived at the town of Tibar, the sun had long since set. It appeared the road conditions in this world were rather good. Also, the wagon had illumination mana tools that allowed it to travel at night if desired. Still, that wasn't the safest option, so it was rarely taken. But as the driver had a golem wielder like me as a bodyguard and his cargo was perishable, it was both somewhat necessary and somewhat easier to do so this time. In any case, we had no problems.

After we returned to Mr. Chotos's home and put young Teru to bed, three men sat in the living room to drink alcohol and snack on Mr. Chotos's promised potato dish. I thought of it as a modest celebration for Mr. Chotos repaying his debt. The roster for this banquet included Mr. Chotos, me, and Ginem Bari. Gol folded laundry behind me.

Yup, Ginem Bari sat with us. I had forced him to come to Mr. Chotos's house. He'd resisted, but I was to blame for all his injuries. My moral code refused to simply abandon him and go on my way.

If I thought logically about sitting down to drink with someone who had tried to kill me, it really didn't make sense. Mr. Chotos was definitely baffled, and Ginem Bari was bewildered. But I couldn't help it. I mean, I felt bad that while Mr. Chotos and I had been planning to drink, Ginem was being left out.

More importantly, the snack we shared with our drinks, the potato dish, used normal-looking potatoes, though they were slightly different from the ones in my original world. They were a little larger and a bit elongated. However, the difference in appearance was so slight it seemed like a mere graphics error.

We got this world's version of potatoes from the old driver when he heard us excitedly discussing potato varieties. He ended up stopping at a village along the way and buying them for us. That grandpa really took good care of us all the way to the very end of the journey.

When we got home, Mr. Chotos skillfully prepared the potatoes in the kitchen. He boiled them, mashed them, and mixed them together with milk, eggs, butter, and salt.

You're quite the cook, huh, mister? You're a model single father caring for his child.

He poured the runny potato mix into a mold, plopped a small scrambled egg on top, and finished with a brush of a sweet-and-sour red sauce. He placed everything into an oven-like mana tool set and baked it until golden brown, at which point the kitchen was filled with a mouthwatering aroma. Finally, the strange potato dish from another world was complete.

However, how can I properly describe the appearance of this pie made from potatoes? Mr. Chotos placed the round dish on a large plate, cut it into slices with a knife, and set it on the table together with wine and grilled fish that resembled rainbow trout (we had bought it together with the potatoes at that one village.)

When I took a bite of the potato dish, my eyelids fluttered in satisfaction. Ah, it was like the potato version of Yorkshire pudding. Freshly baked, soft and flaky, and utterly delicious. Most importantly, the unfamiliar aroma overflowing with the emotions of this new world was…nice.

Mr. Chotos told us a story as we ate. Apparently, this was a classic home-cooked dish of this world and his deceased wife had often made it, though he claimed her version was far more delicious.

As Mr. Chotos and I talked potatoes, the bandaged Ginem Bari quietly chewed and muttered, "Accenting a dish with the unique aroma of sweet peppers is characteristic of far western cuisine."

It was the first thing Ginem Bari had said since entering Mr. Chotos's house.

"Is this a western dish, mister?" I asked.

"Hm? Ah. Yes. My late wife was born in the west," Mr. Chotos replied.

"Huh…you know a lot, huh, Ginem? Are you also a potato dish enthusiast?" I asked.

"Hey, Nemaki, I ain't some kinda enthusiast, got it?" Mr. Chotos snapped. "I just desperately tried to recreate this by imitating others so Teru could enjoy it like…like *she* used to make…"

"Ah, yeah, yeah. I get it, I get it. You keep repeating yourself. Hey, mister, you're pretty drunk already, huh?"

As I bantered with the red-faced middle-aged man, Ginem Bari stared at the half-eaten potato dish with an odd cast of shame and said, "I was…also born in the west."

"Hmph," I said.

"It's a nostalgic flavor. Just like the one my mom used to make for me as a kid," Ginem said.

Before long, the hopeless Mr. Chotos had descended into the kind of drunk where he babbled fondly about his late wife with reddened eyes. This man was so devoted to her memory that it was kind of sad.

The utterly sauced merchant told his tale with tears welling. Back when he peddled as a young man, he had stopped by a small town in the far west, where he met and fell in love with a hairdresser's daughter. She had beautiful chestnut hair and an innocent smile, making her exceptionally adorable. She was like an angel. The first two times he confessed his love to her, she rejected him. Yet he persisted, visiting the hairdresser whenever his bushy hair grew out. Finally, she gave in.

As the pair peddled through the territories together, they saved money until they could open a shop in Tibar. They were also nearly on the verge of giving up on children when they were blessed with one five years ago. Their adorable baby girl was born on a cold, snowy night. Mr. Chotos spent those days in bliss with his gentle wife and daughter.

Then both wife and daughter fell gravely ill. As his sickly wife weakened, she entrusted their daughter's future to him. The last thing his wife told him

was that she was happy. Those words had continued to support him through all the tough times.
Jeez, such a pure love story was like poison to the ears of single guys like Ginem Bari and me. I silently chugged the oddly salty wine left in my cup.
“Like I said…I would…no matter how much hair I lost… Just this hairstyle… filled with her feelings…” Mr. Chotos belched forlornly.
“Jeez,” I slurred. “You’ve gone an’ talked and drunk yourself t’sleep. What a hopeless drunkard, ha ha.”
At this moment, I heard sniffling from somewhere—like someone sobbing. When I looked to my side, I was surprised to find Ginem Bari crying.
Ughhh, come on! Give me a break.
“Ginem, don’ tell me yer cryin’ from Mr. Chotos’s love story. Jeez, yer a pitiful guy…”
“Guh… Yer sayin’ that, but aren’t you cryin’, too, Nemaki?” Ginem sniffed.
“Huh? Me, cryin’?” I sniffed. “I want you to stop…spreadin’ such base slander.”
Ginem Bari and I carried the lovely late wife’s drunken widower back to his bedroom so he wouldn’t catch a cold.
The night in sleepy Tibar wore quietly on. The starry sky peeked through the small window of the bedroom I shared with Gol, twinkling silently.

Chapter 25:
Departure and Morning after the Rain

THE MORNING DRIZZLE stopped, and the sky opened up. The west wind was calm. It was the perfect weather to set off.
As I prepared for my departure, Gol accompanied me to Chotos's Mana Tool Shop.
Mr. Chotos, watching us, hesitated before opening his mouth. "Nemaki, are you really going? It's no trouble if you want to spend a bit more time in Tibar…"
"Mister, can you please be quiet? You keep spoiling me, so my departure keeps getting pushed back, and now I've dallied here for like half a month already!"
Two weeks had passed since the little negotiation drama with the Paisley Company. The town of Tibar was comfortable, sure, but I couldn't simply settle there.
After all, on my list of goals, "Find out stuff about the Sorcerer King of Destruction and his summoning" was first and foremost. Whether the answer meant discovering a method to return to my original world or finding a way to ensure my safety in this one, this investigation was of utmost importance.
At any rate, no institution in this region could enable me to conduct that investigation. In the first place, the Sadie territory, where Tibar was located, was considered to be the countryside. If I wanted to go to a library, I apparently needed to head farther west to a large city in another territory, especially if I wanted to go to a place on the level of an academic institution. The largest library in this country was said to be much, much farther west, all the way in the imperial capital. But it would no doubt be a long, tough trip to make it that far, so I'd be satisfied if I found a regular library first.
In any case, Mr. Chotos didn't seem to know much about the Sorcerer King, and I couldn't thoughtlessly ask around because even basic lore about the Sorcerer King was considered taboo by the Church. Even if I stayed in Tibar forever, I would eventually be driven into a corner.
Despite that, Mr. Chotos kept delaying my departure, and Teru kept sobbing whenever it came up… I couldn't just *leave*. What was with this parent-child duo?!
Moreover, I had failed to spend these past few weeks studying more about this world. Instead, I tended Mr. Chotos's store and played with the five-year-old.
What else did I do? Hmm… Ah, right. Ginem Bari had fully recovered within a few days and finished repairing his jester golems. So, as a form of rehabilitation, we had numerous Gol vs. Clown Brigade golem-fighting game

rematches. The loser had to treat the winner to a meal. Currently, Gol won by a landslide every time, so Ginem had to keep treating me.
Huh…exactly when had Ginem and I become so close? Almost like…I dunno, friends?
In any case, I was on a serious backslide. I felt like an elementary school student frivolously wasting his summer vacation. I hadn't grown at all this past half month. The only skill I had acquired was knowing exactly when to stop wiping Gol before her eyes turned cloudy.
As a matter of fact, I had confirmed quite a few malfunction conditions beyond removing her extensions and her sniffing my underwear. For example, when I wiped various parts of her body—such as her inner thighs, chest, ears, armpits, or belly button—too much, her eyes instantly turned pink. In the beginning, I hadn't known how to manage this, so it had been super difficult to clean her without the risk of breaking her.
Also, I worried that the number of locations on Gol that made her cloud up had been steadily increasing, especially when it came to her belly button. It seemed that because I had messed around too much when I stuck my finger inside it that first night, it had become a weak spot for her. Ugh, inexcusable.
Whenever I stopped wiping, Gol would look pained and stare me with her greedy, cloudy eyes. However, stopping was, of course, a necessary measure to protect her. *Sorry, but please understand, partner.*
Given all these pressing reasons to sally forth, we were at last being seen off on our journey west by the father-daughter duo in front of Chotos's Mana Tool Shop.
Teru has been bawling her eyes out for some time already. This five-year-old usually could be surprisingly mentally strong, yet bringing up my departure made tears spill down her cheeks. Now that I was just about to set off, her crying had turned into a Biblical flood. As she sobbed, she tried with great effort to speak. "Deru, doo! Wid Mistuh Nemagi! Miss Gowedaru, doo! Goh twugehder!!"
No good. I can't understand. This far exceeds the capacity of my strange translation ability.
"Wid Mistuh Nemagi!" Teru began coughing, having finally strained herself to the point of throwing up.
I patted her back. Gol also joined in by stroking Teru. Seeing this, my eyes widened. The way Gol's palm lovingly touched Teru was practically the same as when she gently stroked me—and it was totally different from the way she usually clumsily ruffled Teru's hair.
This farewell gesture convinced me: Gol really had become attached to Teru. I just felt it to be true.
Occasionally, Gol radiated homicidal intent and mishandled other people's possessions, but she was unabashedly happy when she hugged this small girl. Gol's carelessness with children had greatly diminished since she started combing Teru's hair, putting her to bed, and such. She behaved like

a real older sister now. Whenever I saw her like this, I felt like I was catching a glimpse of her true personality.
“Nemaki…” Even Mr. Chotos’s eyes had moistened, just like his daughter’s.
Hey, stop! I’ve told you, no one wants to see an old man do that!
“Jeez, will you be okay, mister?” As I let out a sigh at this pitiful man, I gazed up at the tool shop behind him.
This single-story, wooden shop looked a bit shabby, and it appeared slightly larger than the other shops on the street, so it reeked of a kind of half-baked elegance. I had spent most of my days there during my time in Tibar. I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel sentimental about it.
But I wouldn’t need to worry about it anymore, management-wise. The once-scarce goods were being restocked, and in response, the customers were steadily returning. In addition, Mr. Chotos still had one remaining sorcery core, although he hadn’t found a buyer yet. This was the extra I had given him for the repair costs of Gol destroying his wall. Since he no longer had to worry about that malicious debt with its ridiculous interest, he didn’t need to rush to find a buyer.
Still, I was surprised when Mr. Chotos wrote up a kind of contract between us concerning the sorcery core, even though he was such an unreliable guy. I didn’t read the contents, so I didn’t know whether it was an investment agreement or a consumer-lending agreement or what. I tried to turn down that nuisance piece of scrap, but Mr. Chotos refused to yield. As you’ve seen, he was a stubborn man. His stubbornness was so hardcore that he’d managed to win over a beautiful and good-natured wife. At that level, it was like some kind of special skill. I was sure that no matter what I said, we would end up running in circles.
I decided to just accept the contract as a formality. But for some reason, I had a feeling we would need firewood for tonight’s dinner. The contract would be a good starter for the fuel.
We also had a countermeasure against any more punk attacks.
I turned to the blue-haired man with delicate features and a purple robe, the one who stood next to the Chotos family. “I’ll be leaving the rest to you, Ginem.”
“Yeah, I got you. I’ll make sure to look after the old man’s shop.”
Could you believe Ginem Bari was actually concerned about the safety of Mr. Chotos’s shop? He seemed to have thought about a lot of things after he suffered that initial defeat, and he told me he wanted to reflect and start seriously training with his golems again—from the beginning.
Yeah, that’s good. Turn over a new leaf and stop hunting newbies, Ginem.
“Say, Ginem. You won’t betray us for a payday, right?”
“I owe you big, Nemaki. You saved my life. I won’t dishonor that,” Ginem Bari replied with a dignified expression. Then his face crumbled pitifully. “Besides, there’s no way I could ever betray Miss Goretaru. I’d get so murdered…”

“Ehhh? You’re just scared of Gol! You sounded so cool just then, but you instantly ruined it.”
Ginem had taken to calling Gol stuff like “Miss Goretaru.” Even though he was casual and didn’t try to “sir” or “mister” me, he was unfailingly polite with Gol. He really didn’t make any sense. He’d been all twitchy with me to start, but he’d slowly opened his heart. Now he could say whatever was on his mind to me. Conversely, he regarded Gol with absolute awe.
It was almost as if he’d had a terrible epiphany.
In any case, in a somewhat wild turn of events, Ginem wouldn’t have to find a job any time soon, as he’d been paid in advance by the Paisley Company for the job he ultimately failed. In the meantime, he was settling in Tibar to practice with his golems and work as a bodyguard. You could say he was a perfect match for Mr. Chotos’s shop.
“Well, you don’t have to worry. There’s no one in Sadie who I can’t beat. If I call myself this shop’s bodyguard, no creep’s going to so much as glance at it.”
“Eh? Really? I’m pretty sure you lose to me every single time.”
After our tons of Gol vs. Clown Brigade matches, Gol had become so familiar with the jesters’ movements that she was far stronger than them. Usually, Gol decapitated all four with a single chop, ending the fight in less than a minute.
“Yeah, but not because I’m weak! You guys are just bizarrely strong!”
“Ehhh? You sure you’re not just small fry?”
“You…! I definitely won’t lose next time, got it?!”
As Ginem and I argued, Mr. Chotos wryly smiled.
In truth, I had asked Ginem to watch over the man’s shop as a kind of insurance, though I didn’t think I needed to worry about the Paisley Company meddling anymore. You see, the Zibil branch office seemed to have gone out of business. Five days before, one of Mr. Chotos’s customers had shared a rumor that a fire had broken out in that branch.
It seemed that right before the Paisley Company building went up in flames, they had a quarrel with some great, enraged spellcaster and earned the spellcaster’s ire. Although there wasn’t any definitive proof of this—as everything had turned to ash—the people of Zibil whispered that the destruction had to be the result of spellcraft.
What a terrifying story. Jeez, how badly off is public order in this world?! I absolutely don’t want to meet some crazy, pyromaniac spellcaster.
In any case, the Paisley Company had committed hundreds of evil acts, so such a fate was bound to come knocking eventually. I couldn’t just dismiss this as “someone else’s problem”—it was a lesson. I needed to always pay attention to my own actions and comport myself with modesty and kindness toward others.
Now, the following is just my personal conjecture as a master detective, but I believe the true identity of the culprit who destroyed the Paisley Company branch office was a Fire spellcaster.

I mean, obviously, right? They burned down the building and camouflaged it as a normal fire. It's obvious they used their absurd, flashy Fire spells to do crime!

Seriously, the Fire attribute is good-for-nothing. Hmph! It could only be used for assassination and arson. It needed to learn from the peaceful Earth attribute, which had no other real use aside from enjoying a nice golem-fighting game, where the only stakes were who bought whose lunch.

As a side note, when Mr. Chotos heard the Paisley Company had been burnt down, rather unbelievably, both he and Ginem accused me of secretly setting the building on fire.

That was absolutely outrageous. A cooked-up baloney accusation, and utterly inconceivable. That branch manager had already agreed to mutual noninterference by way of my brilliant negotiation skills. I was a proud, cultured man and an honest gentleman. How could I do something so barbaric as to break that promise?

In the first place, it was totally beyond my ability to turn such a huge building like that into a magnificent blaze; I couldn't even use Fire spells. Moreover, lately I'd spent every day being badgered by Teru to play house in the shop, so the resident five-year-old could provide me with a flawless alibi. Logically speaking, I was clearly innocent.

Unfortunately, it seemed Mr. Chotos and Ginem could never become master detectives like me.

At any rate, now that the Paisley Company's business had been so upended, I didn't think they would meddle with Mr. Chotos's shop or Tibar again.

"Well, everyone…take care, now." I said my farewells in a cheerful tone and patted the crying, sniffling Teru's head before starting down the street.

"Hey, Nemaki," Mr. Chotos called out.

"What now, mister? I just said goodbye; don't try to ruin it." I turned with a dejected look, but I was surprised to see Mr. Chotos's eyes were no longer disgustingly teary.

With a serious face, he said, "Remember, Nemaki. When you're done with your important business, you can always come back to Tibar, all right?"

"I'll keep that in mind."

Well, I would consider returning home whenever I felt like seeing the face of my adorable stepsister, Teru. I didn't care at all about seeing any unsightly old men.

Mr. Chotos snorted. "Jeez. You're going to be like that till the very end, huh?" He sounded irritated, but there was a smile on his face. "If you don't know where else to go at the end of your journey, don't hesitate to come right back home. I'll keep that second-floor bedroom empty for you and Goretaru."

"…"

After I quietly nodded, I turned on my heel, my olive-brown robe fluttering from the momentum. "Thanks for your care. See you later."

I began walking down the streets of Tibar, Gol by my side.

After a short while, I turned around one final time. A balding, middle-aged man and a fair-skinned, innocent girl… They didn't look anything alike, yet their continuing farewell waves were identical.

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The dignified back of the young man in an impressive robe disappeared into the distance. Beside him, the beautiful shrine golem with long, flowing, silken hair and the appearance of a white goddess also disappeared.
The wind blowing from the west made a lonely sound.
"He really left, huh?" Chotos closed his eyes in front of his shop.
His daughter, Teru, continued to wave her small hand in the direction of the young man, although he could no longer be seen.
Chotos extended his arms and picked up Teru, who was light for her age. He used his sleeve to wipe the tears from his beloved daughter's eyes. Then he looked back toward the street and said, earnestly, "Nemaki's personality is… How can I put it? Not quite simpleminded honesty. Calling him a 'maverick' also doesn't seem right. It's hard to explain, but he's got a strange charm."
Nemaki Dasai was a truly odd fellow. A black-haired man with noble eyes who claimed to have come here from a distant country, his mannerisms and astonishingly excellent equipment proved he had been born into wealth. Chotos understood that the majority of Nemaki's outlandish behavior was due to his upbringing. However, the real strangeness lay elsewhere.
More than anything, Nemaki's unique fighting ability deserved utter admiration. The soldiers in charge of maintaining Sadie's public order had been unable to lay hands on the Swordbreaker gang, yet Nemaki annihilated them as easily as twisting a baby's arm. After that, he caught the attention of the strongest golem wielder in Sadie: the Four Jester Wielder. But likewise, despite distance and an overwhelming disadvantage, he managed to attain a crushing victory.
Nemaki's talent as a golem wielder equaled—perhaps even surpassed—that of the strongest wielders in the vast land of the Heilemia Empire. Additionally, Nemaki had shown them a glimpse of his own tremendous fighting ability as a spellcaster sans golem. Chotos had never heard of a living human capable of destroying a military-grade golem, let alone at long range.
But the most terrifying thing about Nemaki was his abnormal clarity of vision on the battlefield; it was as if he could see through all the traps his opponents laid. It was no wonder his enemies could only describe him as a nightmare.
With his unorthodox, unbeatable strength, Chotos wanted to say Nemaki was just like the kind of hero who appeared in a picture book.

However, Nemaki didn’t seem to think anything much of these talents of his. The proof was in how he never looked down on the powerless townsfolk, nor did he put on a haughty attitude and show off his power.
Moreover, he constantly threw insults at Chotos, calling him a useless middle-aged man or a sloppy old geezer. At the same time, he always went out of his way to help out and protect Chotos. His words said one thing, but his actions showed a surprisingly gentle side. Frankly, he was more sincere than the protagonists in those books Chotos had read as a child.
Nemaki had been exactly the same way with Ginem Bari. He called Ginem harsh things like “delinquent,” “outrageous,” “pitiful,” and such, but at the same time, he visited Ginem every day until he recovered, always giving some random reason. Once Ginem had healed, the two practiced with their golems and ate lunch together. Now that Chotos thought about it, Nemaki might have done this out of kindness so Ginem wouldn’t feel alone after being put in such a difficult spot.
Nemaki’s words and behavior were often at odds, but it strangely attracted the people he came in contact with. That was the kind of young man he was.
A young man dressed in a gaudy, stage-worthy purple robe had been leaning against the shop wall and gazing down the road toward where Nemaki disappeared. He really couldn’t hide the loneliness in his eyes.
“Not simply honest, huh…? It’s as you said, old man. Nothing ‘simple’ can fully express Nemaki’s personality. When he was honest, he was *utterly* honest,” Ginem Bari muttered.
At this moment, Ginem suddenly remembered something. “Oh, yeah, Nemaki said that in his hometown, there was a special word to describe just such a personality.”
Chotos turned to Ginem with an interested face. “Oh yeah, like that ‘bahcode’ thing he says.”
“Right, right. And like ‘faiten geym.’ Um, what did he call it again…?”
Ginem stared into space for a moment before raising his eyebrows. “Ah, I remember. It’s ‘tsundory.’”
“Tsundory?”
“Yeah. He said adorable people who care deeply for their partner but say all sorts of things to the contrary are called that in his hometown.”
“Huh. That’s another strange word.”
“Nemaki said he wanted to meet a charming tsundory girl in this country, but…it seems to me he’s the one who’s the most tsundory.”
“Ha ha, that’s true. That Nemaki is, without a doubt, a first-class tsundory.”
Chotos and Ginem exchanged a glance and laughed loudly. In her father’s arms, young Teru laughed along with them. The tears had finally dried from the corners of her little eyes.
The front of Chotos’s Mana Tool Shop was bathed in bright light after the morning rain.

Epilogue

"ACHOO!" I let out a loud sneeze on the roadside. "Oh no. Did I catch a cold…?"
Exercising while half-dressed after a bath at night might have been the cause. I had just been trying to be health-conscious, but it looked like I'd done the opposite.
As I sniffled and glanced sideways, Gol shook her body in concern. My reckless idea to do radio exercises dressed that way had worried my partner.
Ah, I'm really sorry. I'll make sure to properly wear clothes next time so I don't worry Gol. I resolutely swore this upon my heart.
After Gol and I had left everyone, we walked along the street for some time until we passed through the west gate and finally exited the town. Because I stopped when I sneezed, I casually turned around. Behind me was a simple, peaceful town composed of rows of wooden buildings and surrounded by brown, earthen walls. This was the town of Tibar. I had only thought of this place as a quick rest stop to replenish my supplies, but I had unexpectedly ended up overstaying.
By the gate stood an old gatekeeper with a long spear. Because I had stopped and looked back, he raised his spear and bowed.
The posture and angle of this world's bow was slightly different from my original world's. I politely returned his bow in this world's fashion. It seemed that within this half month, I'd become a familiar face.
Say, Mr. Gatekeeper, I'm most grateful for that courteous bow of yours, but could you please stop ogling Gol's butt? My partner's getting riled up.
Well, he wasn't the only culprit. Everyone stared at Gol's body too much. I was onto them! And Gol was increasingly irritated. If only they'd think of the trouble they caused me every time I had to take Gol's hand to suppress her anger and prevent some kind of retaliation.
Well, I had no choice. I had to leave swiftly before Gol could bite him. If she made a scene here, our departure would be postponed yet again.
"Come on, Gol. We're going." I called out to my partner, who was beginning to stare with faintly murderous intent at the gatekeeper, and began to walk ahead.
She slightly lifted her ears in response to my call and swiftly caught up to me.
As we continued down the road, we soon reached the crossroads. I still remembered turning right and heading north on that wagon. Today, we wouldn't turn, and would continue straight west until we reached the center of the country.

I slowed my pace at this intersection and leisurely enjoyed the scenery to my left, gazing at the straight road that continued south and the idyllic, rolling green land.
At that moment, the sound of the wind suddenly disappeared.
“Hm?” I stopped, frowning, and soon realized the reason. Ah, I see. The wind just calmed. The wind always blew from the west before, but I guess there are times when it dies down.
Someone called out to me then, their voice weaving through the gaps in the wind. “Young man, are you leaving already?”
When I faced the direction of the voice, I saw a short, hooded person holding a short cane standing next to me.
“Huh? You’re that…”
It was the grandma who had given me a piece of candy when I first arrived in Tibar. The same grandma had given me candy multiple other times. Frankly, she was the only woman in Tibar I had succeeded in seducing.
Huh. This grandma was actually the first person who’d spoken to me in Tibar, and if it weren’t for her informing me of the existence of the mana tool shop, I wouldn’t have even encountered the Chotos family. She was also the one who had informed me of the horrible debt Mr. Chotos bore, and the heartbreaking reasons for it. I don’t think I would’ve gotten involved with the man if I hadn’t learned of his circumstances.
Thinking about it that way, could I call this a twist of fate or something? As people sometimes say, everything just fell into place.
“Thank you for your help before,” I said, conveying my appreciation and farewell. “Yes, I’m planning to leave. Although it’s regrettable, I can’t stay. I have some important business to attend to.”
I was a man who understood that one must be polite and respectful towards one’s elders. (Mr. Chotos was an exception.)
As I addressed her, the grandma stared at my face. Honestly, this woman’s appearances were always quite sudden. Every time I noticed her, she was already standing right next to me. I suppose to the overprotective Gol, such an elderly lady was safe and didn’t need to show her papers to approach me. At that thought, I casually glanced toward my partner.
Suddenly, the grandma threw off her hood and grabbed both my shoulders with her thin hands.
“Eh?” I startled.
Then she pulled me toward herself. Our faces were awfully close. This was bad. At this distance, our lips will touch, ma’am. We’ve only just met, so don’t you think this is going a bit too fast?
While I was perplexed, the strange smell of medicinal herbs wafted from the woman’s hair, which was now exposed. It wasn’t an unpleasant odor, but rather a soothing, even welcoming aroma.
Nevertheless, now that I was looking closely at this lady, she had quite well-defined features. I was sure she had tempted the hearts of many a gentleman in her youth.

This candy of a grandma fixed her eyes on me. Her golden eyes held a far stronger light than I could have imagined. This warm and powerful gaze was fixed on me, yet it seemed that at the same time, she was also looking somewhere far off into the distance.
And, for some reason, she seemed terribly and unbearably sad.
“Young man. I feel you’ll encounter great difficulty in the future… Understand? You absolutely cannot give up on your journey.”
Hmm, is this one of those life lessons elders give the young? This youngster will keep your words in mind, grandma.
I was optimistic at first, but the next words out of the woman’s mouth were an utter mystery.
“You truly are the kindest king… How could the gentle one die the earliest? You mustn’t allow it. Remember, there’s no such thing as a fate determined from the beginning.”
Wh-what is this? All of a sudden we’re getting philosophical? Please wait, my senior in life experience. I was never a very good student when it came to philosophy.
The grandma didn’t seem concerned by my confusion. After she lightly patted my head, she left as if nothing had happened. On her departure, she gave me a bag full of candy. How kind.

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The west wind began to blow past my ears once more. I stood still as I held the bag of candy.
“What just happened…?”
I felt like I had been daydreaming. I had already lost sight of the candy grandma. I had been so sure she was there just a moment ago.
Really though, what was up with that? In the end, the only hearts I managed to capture in the town of Tibar were that grandma and Teru. Ah, well, I might have been one step short of making Old Dancy from the bookstore fall for me.
B-but, that’s…just a little, um, like…
Just once, I wouldn’t mind getting somewhere with a totally average woman around *my* age. What exactly would I need to do to have that wonderful encounter and begin my love story? I was deprived of romance. I just kept running into little girls and grandmas. Was there possibly something getting between me and available women?
As I thought through this deep philosophical quandary, I took a piece of candy from the bag I had just received. I carelessly let it slip from my hand, and it tumbled toward the ground.
It never landed. A beautiful white palm extended out from beside me and caught the candy with ease. The owner of this white, nigh transparent hand quietly, softly, and gently pushed the candy against my lips with her fingers.
“Thanks, Gol.”

As Gol pushed the candy into my mouth, her fingers brushed my lips as if tracing their shape. Since I'd thanked her and smiled, her long ears fluttered with delight.

Hey, partner. What do you think? Do you think I've been accidentally snapping my own romance flags with women my age…?

While I posed this question in my heart, Gol continued tracing my lips. She had been playing around with my face for some time now, but I guess she didn't get bored.

As I studied her satisfied face and long ears, I suddenly remembered. "That reminds me. When it's just the two of us, the angle of your ears lowers."

Whenever we were alone, Gol's lovely elven ears very faintly lowered, as if she were relaxed. Though, saying that, it was really only a few millimeters' difference, so I didn't think anyone but me would even notice.

As I pointed this out, Gol lowered her face as if bashful. Her gleaming crimson irises reflected the morning sun and gave off a pale shine. I was sure her reaction meant I was right.

I had appeared in this other world in my lame pajamas before I knew what was happening… But it didn't seem like a chance encounter and love story with a wonderful woman would begin anytime soon. On the other hand, the strength of the mutual understanding between my silent partner and myself was steadily progressing each day.

"Shall we go?" I asked.

Together with my partner, I resumed my journey down the road to the west as I lightly rolled the candy around my mouth with my tongue.

The distant sky was a refreshingly clear blue while the wind waved the green fields extending before me. A strange, gentle sweetness spread through my mouth, tasting faintly of a nostalgic fruit.

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